



Rift Valley Institute
MAKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WORK

SEEKING THE MEANING OF TRADITIONAL HEALING & SPIRITUAL PROTECTION

among the Faratit communities in Wau, Western Bahr El-Ghazal State

Marlin John Serefino



SOUTH SUDAN WOMEN'S RESEARCH NETWORK

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Relationship between ancestral spirits and traditional healing	8
Different types of traditional healers	10
The role of traditional healers	14
Criticisms of traditional healers	16
Conclusions and Recommendations	18
Recommendations	19

INTRODUCTION

South Sudan's clinical healthcare system is limited in its reach, capacity and affordability. There is a severe shortage of doctors and other trained healthcare workers, especially in rural areas, and more than half of the population do not have access to primary clinical healthcare services. Even where clinical services are within reach, such as in large towns like Wau, many South Sudanese are unable to afford the high costs of hospital treatment and medicines. In addition, many people can be suspicious of clinics and pharmacies, feeling that drugs are being overprescribed to make money. As a result, many people turn to a range of other, more traditional, healthcare providers instead of or to supplement clinical services, including traditional healers that use a range of herbal medicines and spiritual methods to treat their clients. A recent report on epidemic preparedness emphasized the importance of these traditional experts, suggesting that they should also be considered frontline health workers, even if they are not connected to the formal clinical system.¹ Finally, the World Health Organisation recognized traditional healers as crucial to meeting basic health needs, especially in a country such as South Sudan, where accessing the formal health system can be challenging for many of its citizens.²

There has been very little research in South Sudan on the importance and prevalence of traditional forms of healthcare in South Sudan.³ One recent study found that many medicinal plants used in South Sudan have beneficial effects, and urged further urgent research on their use, prevalence, effects and conservation as well as integration of traditional healers into the healthcare system.⁴ Clinical medical organisations and practitioners, however, often have a negative perception of traditional healers and seek to show that some traditional medical

- 1 Nicki Kindersley et al., 'Community Approaches to Epidemic Management in South Sudan: Lessons from local healthcare systems in tackling COVID-19', Rift Valley Institute, 2021.
- 2 United Nation, 'Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General | UN Press', 10 August 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/db230810.doc.htm>; Maureen Ojiambo, 'World Health Officials Mark the Importance of Traditional Medicine', *Voice of America*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/world-health-officials-mark-the-importance-of-traditional-medicine/7248789.html>.
- 3 Catherine Grant, 'Ebola preparedness and traditional healers in South Sudan', K4D Help Desk/Institute of Development Studies, 7 November 2018. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c18e16de5274a465ea7b2fc/497_Ebola_Preparedness_and_Traditional_Healers_in_South_Sudan.pdf.
- 4 Joseph Daniel Wani Lako et al., 'Diversity and distribution of medicinal plants in the republic of South Sudan', *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 7:1 (2020), 18–31. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2020.7.1.0165>

beliefs and practices are wrong or ineffective in comparison with clinical medicine.⁵ In addition, the Christian churches often also have a negative view of traditional medicine because of its association with indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices or witchcraft.⁶

Recognizing that spiritual dimensions of traditional medicine, and the use of medicinal plants, need to be better understood, this study looks at why, and to what extent, people in Wau use traditional and spiritual healers instead of or to complement the clinical health services available through hospitals or clinics. It explores the perspectives of the Faratit communities on the causes of sickness and death, including beliefs around witchcraft or poisoning, and how these are regulated and perceived by community authorities and churches. Traditional understandings of sickness and health often see physical symptoms as linked to spiritual or social causes of ill health. As a result, traditional healers often seek to understand illness in relation to the broader social, moral and spiritual health of the family and community. Finally, traditional healing also incorporates the dead, as well as the living, seeing ancestral spirits as playing an important role in both causing and healing sickness.

To delve into these issues, the research focused on five main areas:

- The inter-generational and inter-sectional perspectives in Wau communities on the practices of traditional healers and diviners in the past and their significance for the present and future.
- Who or what people turn to for healing and protection and why.
- Explore the distinctions between witchcraft, sorcery, witch-doctors, traditional healers and poisoners, as well as diviners and magical practitioners.
- Identify different sources of traditional healing and protection and why these practices persist.
- Explore how courts and other authorities have handled cases of those accused of harming others through witchcraft or poisoning.

This research was conducted in Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal, focusing on the Faratit communities in the area. The Faritit are group of communities which includes the Balanda Ndogo, Kresh, and many others, all of which have their own language and identity, but have

5 Action Against Hunger, 'When Traditional Healing and Health are at Odds - South Sudan', 28 July 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/when-traditional-healing-and-health-are-odds>; Health Pooled Fund, 'Tackling malnutrition in South Sudan' 26 July 2019. <https://hpfsouthsudan.org/tackling-malnutrition-in-south-sudan>; Niyi Awofeso, 'Towards global Guinea worm eradication in 2015: the experience of South Sudan', *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* 17:8 (2013), e577-e582. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijid.2013.03.003>.

6 Lako et al, 'Diversity and distribution of medicinal plants', 18.

similar healing practices, customs and culture.⁷ The researcher drew on her prior knowledge of the social context and languages and tapped into her existing networks to recruit interviewees. The fieldwork was conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 and included both key informant interviews as well as focus group discussions. Respondents were drawn from across different residential areas around Wau and included different generations, genders, professions and youth who have personal knowledge and experience of traditional healing and spiritual protection.

The research protocols developed were submitted to and approved by the Rift Valley Institute's Ethics Review Committee. Data collection was done using qualitative research and included 15 oral history and key informant interviews, participant observation and three focus group discussions with 25 participants (15 men and 10 women). Interviewees included elderly men and woman, religious leaders, customary and traditional court authorities, chiefs, traditional healers and students or community members who have direct experience with traditional healing. Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic or the local languages and recorded, transcribed and analyzed.

7 Edward Thomas, *The Kafia Kingi Enclave: People, politics and history in the north-south boundary zone of western Sudan*, Juba: Rift Valley Institute, 2010.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANCESTRAL SPIRITS AND TRADITIONAL HEALING

South Sudanese are profoundly spiritual people, and even before the arrival of Christianity in South Sudan, people believed in God and the ancestors. Today, many continue to believe in the eternal and ubiquitous spirit of the ancestors, which are called by different names depending on one's ethnic origin, for example, the Balanda call them 'ka guu' (great grand family). Belief in and ongoing relationships with these spirits and ancestors remains strong to this day, and among the Kresh, rituals to honour them are performed yearly by a traditional healer. During an interview with an elderly woman, she explained that before the arrival of Christianity people believed in ancestors and spirit who were often associated with one's mother or father and played various roles in guiding and protecting family members:

Before the missionaries entered the Sudan and especially in Western Bahr el-Ghazal and among the Faratit in particular, people did not know who is God. There is something called *ngorowo* of Bebee and Ngorow of Yanda: *ngorwo* of Yanda is called *ibogo* which means the gods of your mother. The god of your father is called *mbaja*: then *mbaja* is god while *dibogo* are Angels that protect people from evil.⁸

Not surprisingly, for many people in Wau spiritual powers continue to play an important role in the health and protection of individuals, families and communities. For example, twins are believed to have a supernatural power given to them by gods, with the ability to protect their mother and father and will bless them with more wealth if they are treated well. On the other hand, if the twins are not recognized or treated well, then the family will not know peace. The ancestors are seen as the 'living-dead' who are compassionate spirits, blood-related to the people who believe in them, superior to the living, and continue to show an interest in the daily lives of their living relatives. When a child or young person dies, the community sees it as a loss because the community still expected more from him/her, and the deceased is seen as an angel who will immediately join the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, when an older person dies, it is believed that he/she has gone to join the ancestors and is going to be a great help for the

8 Interview with health practitioner and elderly woman, Wau, Kosti residential area, 23 November 2022.

family, interceding from the spirit world when needed to protect the family. Dying at an old age is considered as a blessing, and it is believed that the deceased will join the ancestors and help to protect the family from misfortune. Amongst the Balanda, special rituals are performed after the death and burial of an older person, which will allow him/her to join the ancestors, and then after seven days his/her shadow will return home. For example, one interviewee who had lost his mother was asked, as the first-born son, to return the spirit of his mother to the room where she died:

I tried it when my mom passed on so they ask me to return the spirit of my mom inside (they told me I should burn the grass till the end I took the grass and did so and they forced me to take a whistle to blow it while moving towards my mother room...I took a bottle of glass I blew it while moving in, when I asked why did you told me before that you wanted her to go to where she is going? They said they wanted her to go and visit God and then she will come back home) so this thing is happening especially when a dead person comes inform of a dream immediately in the morning you will see people implementing what that person told them in a dream. So, I believe that the spirit of our ancestors are there to protect.⁹

The Balanda believe that it is important to maintain good relations with ancestral spirits, as they can help with resolving any problems within the family and protect the living. The spirits of both the recently deceased or ancestors as believed to visit the family to check on their well-being and if their wishes prior to their passing have been met, with the understanding if they have not this may cause problems for an individual or the entire family.

For example, that person may say this cloth or this axe, if I die just give it to so and so, and that promise will continue especially when the person is already dead. They will be moving around coming like a dream to confirm whether that material that they left behind is given to that person and he is using it or not and if they are not considering what he/she said that is where problem begins.

While clinical medicine focuses solely on physical symptoms and causes of illness, many people interviewed felt physical health is directly connected to social and spiritual health. Illness, accidents and death are frequently believed to be caused by bad relations within a family or community, offences against ancestral spirits, such as not honoring them every year or doing their rituals, or by someone using supernatural means to cause harm. Healing therefore involves not just treating an individual's body but also examining the possible underlying social and spiritual causes of the illness or injury. As a result, many people will turn to traditional healing for illness before visiting a health centre or clinic.

9 This statement was made during an interview with the student on 3rd January 2023 in Hai Jebel, who lived the experience of traditional healing after the death of his mother, and being as the first born in the house he has to return the spirit of his mother to the room where she was laid to rest. The respondent narrated his experience.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS

Traditional healing is practiced across South Sudan, including among the Faratit community of Wau. The term 'traditional healers' covers a wide variety of categories and roles, including protection, healing or investigating spiritual disorders in the family or community.¹⁰ This variety is reflected in the different names given to them in local languages. For example, a traditional healer is generally called '*nvee mai jok*', in Balanda (or '*Kurum*' in Yulu language), and its categories include the diviners (*nvee vengi*), traditional surgeons (*nvee ja ku*), witch (*nvee nguu*) and rainmakers (*nvee muu*). The services offered by traditional healers are more than just using herbs to treat physical illnesses; they are educators about traditional culture, cosmology and spirituality, counselors, social workers and skilled psychotherapists, or seers and custodians of indigenous knowledge systems and communicating with the ancestors.¹¹ Healers will use a variety of methods including herbal medicine, traditional onions, rituals to remove the source of harm from the body, and divination to establish its underlying social or supernatural causes.



This is mang (soil) and some new harvest of the year, given as an appreciation to the ancestors. The soil is applied to the body of the descendent for protection by an elderly woman who inherited her healing from her late father.



The cooking pot (duk) where two people or more sit for reconciliation. It is also used for healing by cooking groundnut and giving its oil to the sick to apply.

10 Interview with leader, Wau Diocese, 17 December 2022.

11 Researcher's personal experience/knowledge.

Diviners will use bones, cowry shells, cooked groundnut paste or oil, herbs, soil and draw on the spirits of the ancestors to diagnose and prescribe medication for different misfortunes and other spiritual conditions such as sudden death, delivering abnormal children, or unnecessary sickness in the family. They will always explain the causes of the sickness to those asking for their help and seek to find solutions to social issues in the family or community. Sometimes diviners will also function as a mediator between the two or more parties in a conflict by giving some conditions for resolving the dispute, as well as explain the future outcome if the agreement is misused or not considered.

Individuals receive special calls by the ancestors to become traditional healers, often in the form of a long sickness or visitation through dreams by the dead. One male traditional healer recounted how he was called,

I used to sleep for no reason and suddenly something just came and took me under the water and when I came out from there, I was not talking to anyone and even not eating the food anyhow and then my food was discovered, and they brought it to me. That is when I started talking to people. After I talked then I started this work... I begin with my work from Tombura and now am here in Wau. No one trained me: it came to me like a dream or imagination from the deep water and they told me that I should do this or that.¹²

A type of traditional healing is 'ka zoi ba' meaning 'the gods of home' and it is practiced alongside Christianity: the healer interviewed told of doing his healing work during the week and keeping Sunday as the day to attend church and honor God. To him, Christianity and working with the spirits are compatible. During the interview, he noted there were 'false' individuals who pretended to be traditional healers and called for the government to document and legally recognize traditional healers to avoid confusion.



Items and figures that work with and are used by a traditional healer. All of them speak different languages that are revealed to him, and play different roles, depending on the client's age and gender.



The healing room that also has the cross of Jesus, reflecting the healer's belief he has a gift from God.

12 Interview with male traditional healer, Wau, 5 January 2023.

Among the Faratit, there are some forms of healing that are inherited by a child from his/her mother, father or grandparents. One healer, an elderly woman with a seven years' experience in traditional healing, reported inheriting her healing experience from her mother. She told the story of her mother, who had been chosen as a healer by an ancestor while she was still in the womb. Her story illustrates the very real impact that spirits and ancestors are believed to have on an individual's physical health. While telling her story, she brought out some of the items she uses to heal, including her charm, a magic sword that was handed over to her by her mother, and highlighted her room with an altar at the front door where people vow, remove their sandals to show respect for the holy place, and then enter for healing treatments.



The healing room used by a traditional healer.

'This thing came like a fire, but they did not find my grandfather. Then they told my grandmother that that child in your womb is our wife. Then when my mom was born, she grew up and no one thought of it, then she felt sick for five years. When she was sick for five years then they searched to find out the problem. Then they were told that this is the thing that happened long ago. Then they were told to go and complete the ritual...the ritual was performed seven times, but those things also refused that unless they want a markub and sef: shoes and swords from Nyala. Then they [grandparents] went to Nyala and brought those items and they completed the process then my mum became ok'.¹³



The male and female figures welcome those who come for healing, with the female welcoming women and the male welcoming men.

There are also instances where if the healer's treatment is not working, s/he will refer the person to another healer or reach out to spirits directly either using items or diviners to reach out to the spiritual world. Healers will consult with the spirit world to better understand the proximate cause of illness, which can include what were described as 'agents of the supernatural forces' such as big mountains, big old trees or water bodies. After the cause of the illness has been found, the healer will undertake the necessary sacrifices needed for the medicine to work. Finally, there is a

relationship between the clinical health services and traditional healers, as there are instances where the clinics or hospital will refer people to traditional healers or healers will send people to hospital, demonstrating it is possible for the two approaches to health and healing can be complementary rather than in conflict.



Women FDG participants which includes both users and practitioners of traditional healing

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS

Traditional healers are still important sources of intergenerational knowledge about medical plants and remedies and have a broader, more holistic approach to health and healing that incorporates social harmony and spiritual wellbeing. In an interview with a student, he highlighted that scientific medical researchers often consult with traditional healers to identify plants and other materials that have properties that could be used to develop new drugs and other medicine. Furthermore, he noted that 'traditional healers are the root cause of modern medicine. They also take part in peace making and reconciliation for example you have problem among yourself, and you want to settle it, then traditional healer is needed to practice and perform some rituals and ask you both parties to reconcile'.¹⁴

Traditional healers are used to heal fractures, treat malaria or typhoid, remove poisons from the body or deliver a baby, as well as treat illnesses that it is believed cannot be addressed by western medicine. Examples provided included togo, a sickness that can affect a finger and damage it if not treated well, with many of those interviewed believing togo has never been treated by a medical doctor, and the use of the Tamere, a root whose flower is used to is covered a wound or injury for a period and then removed. Healers also provide treatments to widows and widowers, protect the body and house from witchcraft, and more.

During a focus group discussion with elderly women, they revealed that some of them use traditional healing while others practice it and believed that traditional healing is faster because a person gets treatment quickly compared to the hospital where you need to stay for some days or weeks. Below are descriptions provided by participants in an FDG of how a traditional healer would treat various illnesses:¹⁵

- **'Mungu', a sleeping sickness that affects children:** 'They cut below your eyes gbara gbara... grinding the leaf [called ngira]... and put it in the cup of water and then they

14 FDG with students, 28 December 2022.

15 FDG with elderly women, Bazia Jedid, Wau, 10 January 2023.

carry the child and blow him/her fuu fuu fuu... that leaf you will mix it together with the wulu and pilled it and blow it fuu fuu fuu through the compound and in the room and then you will bring the kid and put him/ her down you will notice that the child is white and suddenly defecates and if the child does not defecate you just put him down and urinate on him that child will be fine’.

- **‘Dungbutu’ (headache):** ‘what I have seen is that they used (Wulnva)... Its symptoms is associated with sleeping. So, to heal it, you will take water and put it at the middle of the road when the sun is very hot and this wulva is rubbed in your head and you will sleep with your back you will be fine’.
- **Diarrhoea:** ‘we used to treat it using the hot water mixed with (neem) tree and then you inject it in the child stomach using anus after that you shower the child with hot water and smear him with oil. The stomach will stop running’.

A key theme that emerged during the FDGs, as well as key informant and oral history interviews was that while different forms of healing were practiced long ago and were initially supplanted by clinical medicine, there remains deep respect for and continued use of traditional healing. In many of the cases mentioned, the difficulties both accessing and affording clinical services, especially in rural areas, has meant that people will continue to use traditional healers. They also noted, however, that not everyone who claims to be a traditional healer is in fact a healer, as some use the practices to make money to sustain their life and there is no certification by the authorities of traditional healers. The distinction made between traditional healers who do it because it is a calling, or vocation handed down to them by their ancestors versus those who practice traditional healing as a livelihood is an interesting one. Given the role of traditional healers in also ‘treating’ social ills and conflict, this distinction is not unimportant, as traditional healers can have a positive or negative influence within their communities. In light of this, the repeated calls for the government to recognise and certify traditional healers is not surprising, as this highlights the need to better understand and acknowledge the respect which community members have for their healers.



Convening of traditional court in Wau, headed by a female Chief

CRITICISMS OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS

Traditional healers are sometimes misrepresented as practicing witchcraft. This is partially due to the influence of the Christian churches, where historically, those who practice traditional healing, divination or communing with ancestral spirits were seen as practicing negative supernatural practices such as witchcraft. Amongst many of those interviewed, witchcraft was something that exists, and can be the cause of conflict, violence and poisoning. It was reported that there has been a rise in practice of witchcraft in the area, which is seen a reason by many for the continuing poverty and limited access to the resources and wealth they are experiencing. As a result, people will visit traditional healers or medicine men to protect themselves and their property from the witches.

During a focus group discussion with a Balanda traditional court in Jebel Kheir the chief heading the court recounted their experience dealing with a case of suspected witchcraft brought to her between two sisters were staying in one house. As can be seen from the case narrated below, however, accusations of witchcraft can be based on jealousy, envy, or other forms of social conflict, particularly where one individual is perceived as more successful than others in the same family or community.

'Oh my God! Problems comes to us here every day... [for example] Someone [is] staying with her sister in the house but she is jealous because her sister is having a car and have everything that she need, so she went and took something from the witch in order to harm or destroy her sister...but the diviners keep on telling them [the family] that the other lady is innocent but the other girl is practicing it to become rich... we told them... they should be separated. That is how the diviners help us to see the root cause of the problem and how we used our intelligence to overcome it'.¹⁶

Communicating with ancestral spirits and other unseen powers is seen as difficult and dangerous, requiring the intervention of specialists such as traditional healers, diviners and elders. As a result, these specialists can have considerable social influence and power, which

16 FGD at traditional court, Jebel Kheir, 3 January 2023. Cases involving accusations of witchcraft, poisoning and spiritual misunderstanding are solved by traditional courts.

can be used both negatively and positively. There were criticisms voiced about traditional healers and magical practitioners, with the view that they were using their work to gain wealth, including using ineffective methods or selling their magic to customers who will use it to harm other people or get rich. People are not gullible, however, and can be skeptical about whether practitioners are genuine healers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the research it is clear that traditional healers play an important role in their communities and are often, but not always, well respected. Furthermore, it is a vocation that calls both men and women, and there was no sign that the treatments or advice provided by women traditional healers was valued any less than those provided by men. While a first glance, it would appear that traditional healing and modern medicine inhabit different worlds, the research found that this was not the case – those interviewed highlighted that there are cases where clinics or hospitals will refer patients to a traditional healer, while at the same time, traditional healers will refer patients to those same hospitals or clinics. What was not delved into in the research was the circumstances under which these referrals were made.

Further research should explore in more detail the link between western medical services and traditional healers to help them work together more effectively, as South Sudanese themselves often believe that sickness can be caused by both physical and spiritual factors and that effective treatment involves both realms. Codifying traditional healing, along with introducing laws and policies to govern the practice of traditional healing will help ensure those who offer their services are genuine and can work without fear. Despite increased rates of education and the practice of Christianity, South Sudanese have not stopped using traditional healers and still believe they are providing a valuable service to their community, by addressing both physical and spiritual ills. It would be a shame if in the push to modernity, the role of traditional healers was undermined or denigrated, as their services are clearly valued by and still needed in their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Conduct further research into the use of and practices of traditional healers in South Sudan: This research focused on a single community in South Sudan and provides valuable insights in to how traditional healers are selected, the services they provide and community attitudes. The communities in Wau, however, is not the only one who use the services of traditional healers. Conducting further research would allow South Sudanese medical professionals, the government and aid actors to better understand why communities can prioritise seeking services from traditional healers over clinical medical care and use this to both address weaknesses in the current clinical health system as well as better understand how traditional healers can positively contribute to social cohesion.

Explore introduce legislation and policies to govern and certify traditional healing practices: While many of those interviewed valued the services provided by traditional healers, they also noted that not everyone receives a 'calling' and some have engaged in the practice solely as a means of generating a livelihood. This is not to say that healers should not be compensated for the services that they provide, but rather that the government has an obligation to ensure that those who provide services have been vetted and are working for the best interests of their clients.



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