



Belief in the power of herbal and traditional medicine to cure all manner of illnesses has long been the faith of many Africans who've had little choice but to trust in their efficacy. Sylvia Arthur investigates.

MEDICINE MEN

In countries where over 70 per cent of the population is dependent on local preparations for the remedy of everything (from common ailments to life-threatening diseases), the production of herbal medicine is a source of livelihood for a vast number of people. Although these cheap and cheerful drugs, most of which are unregulated by the national Food and Drug Boards, are the only medicines some people have, their usefulness remains largely unproven.

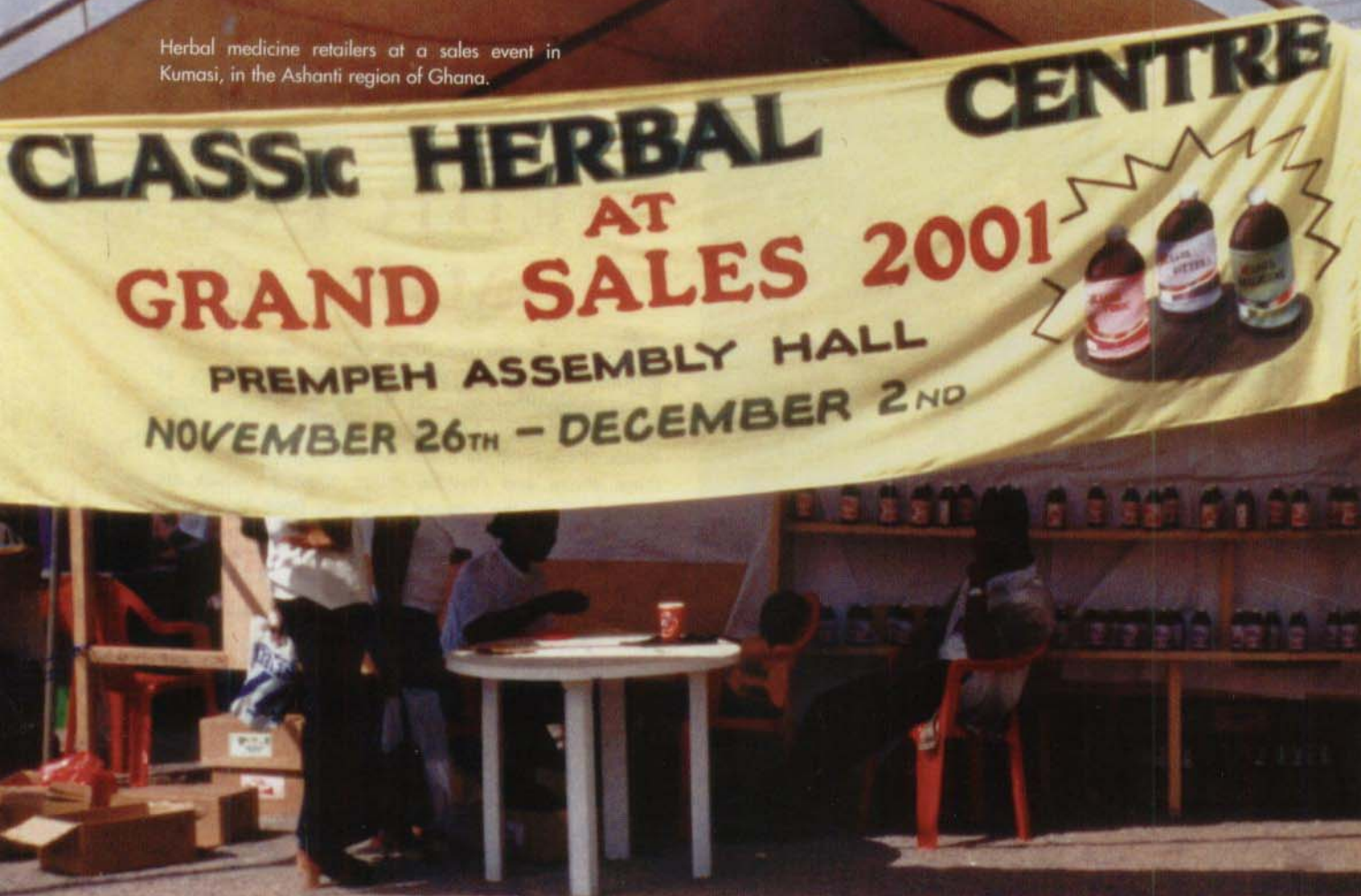
But since the South African government won a landmark case against multinational pharmaceutical companies to produce generic HIV/AIDS drugs, many African governments have begun pouring huge resources into developing the home-grown herbal sector as a legitimate alternative to orthodox medicine.

In South Africa itself it was revealed last month that the Medical Research Council would be testing a local medicinal plant, *Sutherlandia Frutescens*, for its potential life-prolonging properties in HIV/AIDS sufferers. The plant, which has already been used to treat other diseases, such as gonorrhoea, syphilis and cancer, contains a recognized anti-retroviral agent and a local company has contracted farmers to plant acres of the bush in expectation of successful clinical trials.

With HIV/AIDS the number-one killer in Africa, the management of the deadly disease is the motivation behind a concerted effort to standardize an accessible and affordable resource. The difference between the two schools of medicinal thought regarding the treatment of AIDS is clear-cut. While orthodox scientists are primarily concerned with honing drugs for the control of the virus, herbalists and traditional-medicine practitioners are concentrating on the search for the so-far elusive cure the world is desperately waiting for.

And in developing countries, where overstretched health budgets often can't extend to costly pharmaceutical imports, the commitment to the development of the herbal industry and, in particular, a herbal cure for AIDS, is seen as socially

Herbal medicine retailers at a sales event in Kumasi, in the Ashanti region of Ghana.



and economically fundamental to the region's overall prospects.

Many have claimed to have discovered the remedy for the disease that is crippling the continent and the race is on to patent the drugs before Westerners, who know the effectiveness of the medications, do so themselves.

A Ghanaian herbalist taken to Japan to test his alleged AIDS cure was found murdered soon after he returned to his country. Local speculation claims that the Japanese who took him abroad were behind the killing, stating that some of the herbalist's anti-AIDS preparation was stolen at the time of his slaying. Dr Charles Ssali, a Ugandan medical doctor now based in the UK, was exiled and his work sabotaged after he claimed to have found a natural AIDS cure.

So, is the solution to Africa's numerous social and economic problems to be found literally growing in its own backyard?

The potential for progress is certainly enormous. However, Dr Felix Konotey-Ahulu, a consultant physician and distinguished professor of human genetics at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, cautions that, if herbalists are not taken seriously domestically, the continent will not reap the benefits of any possible breakthrough. "If herbalists are not duly recognized and the necessary support not given to them to operate, foreign nationals who know the efficacy of traditional medicine will patent the medicines as their own," warns Konotey-Ahulu. He insists that the best way to ensure good practice in the industry is to place a government-appointed herbalist to oversee operations. "They know their work best, their needs and what is required to champion their rights."

At the Centre for Scientific Research into Plant Medicine in the Eastern region of Ghana, scientists are currently testing a number of herbal drugs, which their manufacturers claim are a potential cure for the HIV virus. The majority, if not all, will doubtless prove largely ineffective in the final analysis.



Floats and rallies in major cities marked World AIDS Day, 1 December 2001. Each day, 200 Ghanaians contract the HIV virus.

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Last year, the Ministry of Health-funded body carried out trials involving groups of HIV sufferers, herbalists and four of Ghana's top hospitals, which were responsible for administering test subjects with anti-AIDS herbal preparations and monitoring their progress. However, the results from the trial were never released and nothing has been heard about it since. The reason for the lack of information remains unclear.

But it's not simply the case that most who claim to have found a cure for the disease are trying to dupe their unsuspecting patients. There is an admitted gulf in the knowledge of herbal practitioners concerning the causes, symptoms and stages of progress of the HIV virus. Consequently, when some herbalists manage to alleviate the opportunistic diseases of the virus (like fever, diarrhoea and anaemia), they mistakenly claim to have cured HIV itself.

Dr Prince Kakari, founder of the Gye Nyame Herbal Clinic and Maternity Home, says he sees about six HIV cases a week at

his small treatment centre in the city of Kumasi. Before the patients come to him for treatment they're already aware that they're carrying the HIV virus. Kakari himself doesn't have any means of testing those who come to him for care, but he claims to be able to deduce from the symptoms displayed whether or not a person is HIV positive. He says that, although it's the symptoms of the disease he's trying to cure, he'll also prescribe his patients medication to treat the virus itself.

He is part of a group of orthodox and herbal doctors working together to develop an AIDS drug. He admits that herbalists alone can't find a solution but, he says, neither can the orthodox sector. The reason behind their joining forces is to create a legitimate working group.

Asked whether he believes in claims from other African countries to have discovered the HIV/AIDS remedy, Dr Kakari is quick to answer in the affirmative. "Oh, yes. I believe them. Even here in Ghana, I'm not saying that we don't have a



Dr Prince Kakari outside his Gye Nyame Herbal Clinic in Kumasi.



"The people who come to us think that we just go to the bush and pick the leaves, that we don't pay for it because it doesn't come from abroad. So, if the person comes [to me for treatment] and afterwards he feels better, when the time comes for him to pay, he's crying."

medicine [cure] for AIDS. We have. But before you can say, 'I've got it,' it's not easy. That's why we've formed a collective of herbalists, doctors, nurses and pharmacists. We've got together and we're working on it so that we can reach a certain level. Then the government will take notice of what we're doing and people will hear about us. Because if you're one person working alone on an AIDS drugs here in Ghana, people will not believe you," concedes Kakari.

The Ghanaian government has long shown confidence in the herbal sector. The Traditional and Alternative Medicine Directorate, a division within the Ministry of Health established under the Traditional Medicine Practice Act in 1991, is responsible for regulating the practices of the huge number of herbalists operating throughout the country. Last year, the Directorate announced that its main mission was to improve the image of herbal preparations by setting out guidelines for the packaging, prescription and dosages of all products on the market.

Another aim of the government is to forge a lasting partnership between herbalists and orthodox doctors without compromising their respective contributions. The idea is to establish a collaborative relationship that will eventually integrate herbal medicine into conventional medical procedures

so that, in cases where conventional medicine is unable to facilitate recovery, a patient may be referred to an herbalist for consultation and vice versa.

Kofi Adusei, senior health planner at the Traditional and Alternative Medicine Directorate, insists that, "The Health Ministry recognizes the role of traditional medicine, but we need the co-operation of herbalists in order to streamline our efforts at improving the health status of the people."

The herbal medicine sector may be the last hope for the continent's dying. Whether or not it can cure Africa's social and economic ills in one prescribed dose remains to be seen. "Here we have a problem," Dr Kakari rues. "The people who come to us think that we just go to the bush and pick the leaves, that we don't pay for it because it doesn't come from abroad. So, if the person comes [to me for treatment] and afterwards he feels better, when the time comes for him to pay, he's crying. So, we need a lot of help.

"The government needs to help us export herbal medicine to get foreign exchange and help the economy. We started the work a long time ago. By now we should be at a high level, with laboratory equipment and other things. But, unfortunately, that's not the situation we find ourselves in."