

BOOK REVIEWS

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Bush Medicine of the Bahamas. A Cross-cultural Perspective from San Salvador Island, including Pharmacology and Oral Histories. McCormack, Jeffrey H., Kathleen Maier, and Patricia B. Wallens. 2011. JHM Designs Publications, 1792 Franklin Drive Charlottesville, VA 22911; www.bushmedicine.org. xxx + 332 + 105 color plates (hardcover). USD 37.00. ISBN 978-0983767305.

Preserving knowledge of Bahamian bush medicine, associated cultural values, and relevant oral histories are among the authors' stated goals for this impressive volume. Identification and uses of bush medicine plants, their cross-cultural potential, and preservation of the San Salvadoran ecology are additional objectives. That these goals have been met or surpassed is abundantly clear. While this work focuses on San Salvador Island, its relevance likely extends to the greater archipelago.

From conception through interpretation, this narrative provides a detailed vicarious experience of the research process. Reminiscent of Rea's style in *At the Desert's Green Edge*, emic and etic perspectives are effectively fused, reporting Bahamian ethnomedicine through interview transcripts and commentary rooted in extensive library, herbaria and field studies. Background, methodology, historical, social, linguistic, and geographic context, photographs and the authors' personal reflections are presented. Bush medicine practitioners are typically elderly, lending urgency to this documentation. The authors respond to this crisis by working with the Bahamian educational system to incorporate bush medicine knowledge into the curriculum.

Beyond description of plants, their medicinal properties and suggested dosages, this project explores the complexity of the Bahamian ethnomedicine as neither a transplanted healing system, nor a totally new one. A syncretic fusion of multiple African dietary, medicinal, spiritual, world views and health traditions, reinterpreted within a common framework of Bahamian ecosystems, and

ultimately influenced by indigenous American and colonial traditions, is systematically revealed. Pragmatism is shown to be a prime factor in the "transformation and reformulation" of the health and healing systems of enslaved people. West Africans of at least a half dozen distinct nationalities conserved transferable aspects of healing traditions, general plant knowledge, and cosmological constructs but selectively repressed others. This sacrifice facilitated the incorporation of New World species into their medical universe, compensating for key medicines and social elements now beyond their reach.

Bush medicine within living memory is the foundation of this volume. *Obeah*, a loose collection of practices for influencing the supernatural and divining, healing, and protection from harm, is a key component of this Afro-Bahamian health maintenance system. Species identification, harvesting, preparation, dosage and administration of ethnomedicines are presented, largely in the informants' own words. Sufficient information is provided that one can reach one's own conclusions, as even conflicting information from informants is presented.

Guidelines to the 176 page chapter, *Materia Medica*, are welcome as twenty categories of information are included for each of 120 medicinal plants and their uses. Sharp, full color plates illustrate 102 of these species. Specific chapters on "Granny Medicine" (midwifery), non-botanical remedies, and "practitioner portraits" complete this meticulous presentation.

There is little to fault here. Black and white photos in each chapter are drab in contrast to the vibrant center plates and dust jacket. This likely represents an effort to maintain the reasonable price of \$37. From dust jacket to final credits, *Bush Medicine of the Bahamas* engages casual and scholarly readers alike. This oversize treasury of folk medicine, story, biography, and photographs is equally appropriate to reference libraries and coffee tables. It is likely to become a standard reference.