

HERBAL MEDICINE AS A CULTURAL EXPRESSION: COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN A COMPARATIVE STUDY ACROSS CULTURAL TRADITIONS

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***Abstract:** Herbal medicine represents one of the most enduring expressions of human interaction with the natural world and remains a fundamental component of global health traditions. This study examines herbal medicine as a cultural communication system, exploring how diverse societies transmit, interpret, and practice plant-based healing. Using a qualitative, cross-cultural research design, the analysis draws on ethnographic literature, historical documents, and contemporary health reports to identify the communicative patterns that shape traditional medical knowledge.*

***Key words:** communication, cultural traditions, herbal medicine, human interaction, cultural communication system.*

INTRODUCTION

Herbal medicine stands among the earliest forms of healing developed by humankind, emerging from the constant interaction between people and the natural world. Archaeological discoveries suggest that humans used medicinal plants as far back as the Paleolithic period, nearly 60,000 years ago. Early civilizations including those of Egypt, India, China, and Mesopotamia left behind extensive evidence showing that plants were essential for maintaining health, treating illness, and ensuring survival. Over time, these societies built sophisticated medical traditions in which empirical plant use intertwined with cosmological interpretations and cultural symbolism. In ancient Egypt, for instance, knowledge of herbs appeared in medical papyri, temple inscriptions, and even burial objects, where traces of botanical substances were sometimes preserved [14].

Across diverse cultures, plants function not only as therapeutic resources but also as elements embedded in broader systems of meaning. Traditional healing is often based on holistic philosophies that connect physical wellbeing with spiritual balance and environmental harmony. Knowledge about medicinal plants how to identify, collect, prepare, and administer them has long been transmitted through oral stories, apprenticeships, and ceremonial practices. These communication patterns sustain intergenerational knowledge and ensure that healing techniques adapt to changing social contexts. As a result, plants hold a complex role in traditional healing systems, acting simultaneously as biological remedies and cultural transmitters of knowledge.

In many societies, herbal medicine goes beyond its utilitarian function and becomes a form of cultural expression [7]. Among the Nalu communities of Guinea, Bissau, for example, plants are understood as intermediaries that link humans with the spiritual world, ancestors, and natural forces. The symbolic meanings attached to specific herbs such as aloe representing restoration, bay leaves symbolizing achievement, or calendula expressing vitality and joy illustrate how plants communicate values and beliefs. Through such associations, herbal medicine becomes a kind of cultural language, reflecting identity, worldview, and collective memory.

In recent decades, traditional medicine has witnessed renewed global attention. Communities and healthcare systems increasingly recognize the cultural depth and therapeutic potential of herbal knowledge [11]. According to the World Health Organization, most countries now integrate traditional and complementary medicine into

their national health policies or legal frameworks [16]. This revival is supported by a growing body of scientific research exploring the pharmacological properties of medicinal plants and by their incorporation into modern health practices. As interest continues to rise, traditional herbal medicine remains not only a therapeutic resource but also an important pillar of cultural heritage in a globalized world [1].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This comparative study investigates how herbal medicine functions as a form of cultural expression across different cultural traditions, with particular attention to the communication patterns through which knowledge about medicinal plants is transmitted, practiced, and preserved. The methodological approach combines qualitative research, comparative cultural analysis, and interpretative examination of documentary sources [2]. The study follows a qualitative, cross-cultural design, aiming to identify commonalities and distinctions in the way various societies communicate herbal knowledge. The research adopts an interpretive anthropology framework, which views healing practices as culturally embedded systems of meaning. This approach allows the analysis to focus not only on the practical use of plants but also on the symbolic and communicative dimensions of traditional medicine. Because the study is based exclusively on published sources, no direct human subjects were involved. However, care was taken to respect Indigenous and local knowledge systems by citing reputable ethnographic and scientific sources and avoiding the misappropriation or decontextualization of traditional practices. The study acknowledges several limitations. Since the analysis is based on secondary data, it depends on the accuracy and cultural sensitivity of existing sources. Additionally, communication practices within each culture can vary considerably by region, healer type, and historical period, meaning that not all nuances can be fully represented in a broad comparative framework.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Examining herbal medicine as a cultural expression requires identifying how different societies throughout history have communicated, maintained, and practiced plant-based healing. In global health discourse, the World Health Organization (WHO) classifies herbal medicine including raw plants, processed extracts, and standardized products as a central pillar of Traditional, Complementary, and Integrative Medicine (TCIM) [15]. Communication within these systems extends far beyond clinical dialogue. It encompasses oral histories, symbolic representations, ritual performance, and shared cultural memory, all of which shape how communities understand wellness, disease, nature, and identity [10].

Despite the geographical and linguistic variety across Indigenous, African, Asian, and European traditions, their communication methods reveal notable similarities. Each system places strong emphasis on observing natural environments, learning through oral teaching and apprenticeship, incorporating spiritual or cosmological explanations, and linking personal well-being to environmental and social balance. Indigenous worldviews often frame illness as a rupture in harmony with land or spirit; African traditions locate it in misalignment with ancestors; Asian systems such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine interpret illness through the destabilization of doshas or Yin-Yang energy; while medieval European healers used theological symbolism such as the Doctrine of Signatures to interpret the medicinal potential of plants [6].

Knowledge transmission in these cultures relied primarily on oral and experiential communication. Elders, healers, and family members played central roles in teaching

younger generations through observation, ritual participation, and repeated practice. These methods not only preserved medical knowledge but also reinforced social cohesion and respect for ecological systems. Healing was understood as a collective process, engaging the individual, the community, and the natural world in a shared pursuit of restored balance.

In contemporary societies, these culturally rooted communication patterns continue to influence interactions between traditional and biomedical systems [2, 9] (Figure 1.). Research indicates that many individuals who use herbal remedies hesitate to disclose this to biomedical practitioners due to concerns about judgment or cultural misunderstanding. Such gaps highlight the need for culturally informed communication strategies that recognize herbal medicine as both a therapeutic approach and a vehicle for expressing identity, values, and relationship to nature.

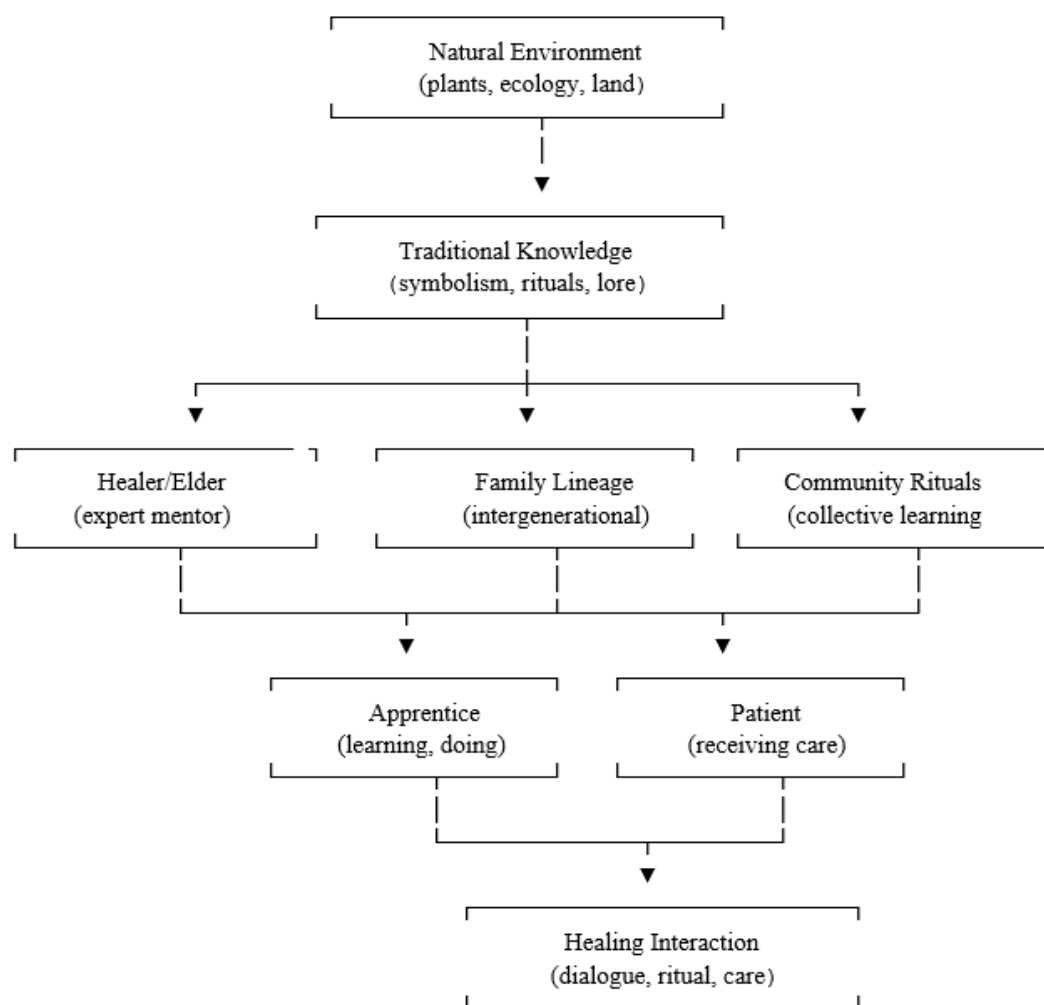


Figure 1. Communication Pathways in Traditional Herbal Medicine Systems

Source: [3,10,12].

Interpersonal communication forms the foundation of traditional medical knowledge. In herbal medicine, this exchange embodies far more than factual information it reflects cultural identity, spiritual worldview, and moral responsibility [3]. WHO definitions emphasize that traditional medicine encompasses the accumulated philosophies, skills, and practices of diverse cultures; within this framework, interpersonal interaction becomes the primary mechanism through which these systems survive and evolve.

Most traditional societies depend on direct personal contact to transmit medicinal knowledge. The healer apprentice relationship, as well as family based transmission, involves storytelling, symbolic instruction, and hands-on guidance [12]. Through this process, apprentices learn not only plant identification and preparation but also ethical principles, rituals, and cosmological beliefs associated with healing. Trust is essential: it binds the healer to the patient, facilitates acceptance of treatment, and strengthens community confidence in the healing process.

Ethnographic research shows that interpersonal communication in traditional medicine usually takes the form of a dialogue rather than a one-directional transfer of advice [8]. Diagnosis and treatment often involve interpreting personal narratives, spiritual signs, or emotional states. When communication breaks down whether through generational divides, loss of cultural continuity, or intrusion of biomedical authority the coherence of traditional practice can be threatened. In this context, communication serves as knowledge, ritual, relational care, and moral duty simultaneously.

As modern health systems increasingly adopt pluralistic models, communication becomes crucial in facilitating collaboration between biomedical and traditional healing frameworks. WHO estimates indicate that up to 80% of the global population uses traditional medicine in some capacity, underscoring its relevance in contemporary healthcare [2].

Modern health communication aims to create bridges between scientific knowledge and culturally grounded practices. Effective integration requires: culturally sensitive messaging, transparent dialogue among practitioners and communication strategies that respect traditional knowledge systems.

Contemporary communication models emphasize empathy, participation, and community engagement rather than strictly top-down education. When public health professionals involve community members, traditional healers, and local leaders in discussions, trust increases, and patients become more willing to disclose herbal medicine use. This collaborative approach transforms patients and healers into active partners in health education, rather than passive recipients of medical instruction [11].

Communication in integrative healthcare must also make biomedical concepts accessible by using local metaphors, resonant narratives, and culturally meaningful terminology [9] (Table 1.). Successful integration depends not only on linguistic adaptation but also on aligning ethical frameworks, regulatory practices, and shared values. Ultimately, modern communication redefines healthcare as a dialogue between scientific and ancestral knowledge systems, acknowledging that human well-being is simultaneously physical, emotional, cultural, and spiritual.

In many African societies, herbal medicine remains the foundation of health care, with 70–80% of the population relying on plant-based therapies. Knowledge is predominantly transmitted through oral instruction, mentorship, and spiritual insight. Healers such as Ghanaian herbalists, South African sangomas, and Nigerian babalawos serve as mediators between physical and spiritual realms. Illness is often interpreted as a disturbance in the relationship between individuals, ancestors, and community. Treatment combines botanical remedies with divination, ritual ceremony, and symbolic communication. Even as urbanization expands, these practices coexist and interact with biomedical systems, reflecting a resilient cultural identity [5].

Asia's classical systems of medicine, particularly Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), present highly structured theories linking herbs to philosophical concepts. Herbs are interpreted through their energetic qualities warming, cooling, dispersing, nourishing and combined into complex formulas personalized to each patient's

constitution. Communication between practitioner and patient emphasizes self-awareness, seasonal attunement, lifestyle balance, and the cultivation of internal harmony. In many Asian countries, these traditions hold official recognition and are integrated into hospitals and national health plans.

European herbal practice evolved from ancient humoral theories to contemporary scientific phytotherapy. While Hippocrates, Galen, and Dioscorides laid early foundations, medieval monastic scholars preserved plant knowledge, and Renaissance herbals expanded its documentation. Today, countries such as Germany and France regulate herbal medicines within clinical frameworks, while others incorporate them as complementary therapies. Despite advances in pharmacology, European herbalism continues to carry symbolic meanings tied to nature, healing, and cultural heritage [13].

Among Indigenous peoples, herbal medicine is inseparable from ecological knowledge, spirituality, and communal ethics. Plants are understood as living beings with agency and wisdom. Healing rituals typically incorporate song, prayer, offerings, and symbolic acts that reaffirm reciprocity with the environment. Illness is seen as a disruption in relationships with land, ancestors, or spiritual forces. Traditions such as Navajo hózhó or Aboriginal Australian bush medicine emphasize harmony, respect for nature, and sustainable harvesting. Elders and knowledge keepers guide younger generations through narrative, ritual, and practical apprenticeship [5].

Table 1.
Communication Patterns in Herbal Medicine Across Cultural Traditions

Cultural Tradition	Knowledge Transmission	View of Illness	Role of Plants	Role of Healer
African Traditions	Oral storytelling, apprenticeship, rituals	Disharmony with ancestors/community	Medicines + spiritual mediators	Mediator between physical and spiritual worlds
Asian Traditions	Formal instruction, classical texts, lineage	Energetic imbalance (Yin/Yang, Doshas)	Carriers of energetic qualities	Guide for internal and lifestyle harmony
European Traditions	Written herbals, monastic knowledge, manuals	Bodily imbalance (humoral → biochemical)	Biological remedies with symbolic heritage	Practitioner using empirical & historical knowledge
Indigenous Americas	Oral tradition, ceremony, ecological teaching	Rupture in relationships with land/spirits	Living beings with agency and wisdom	Custodian of ecological and spiritual laws
Indigenous Oceania	Elder-led learning, ritual, oral preservation	Imbalance with environment	Sacred ancestral gifts + healing	Guide preserving social, environmental, spiritual balance

Source: [8,9].

Across traditions, conceptions of illness reflect the cosmology of each culture. WHO defines traditional medicine as a body of knowledge grounded in cultural beliefs and experiential learning. In many traditional societies, illness represents a disturbance in moral, spiritual, or ecological harmony (Table 2.)

Table 2.

Cultural Interpretations of Illness and Healing Across Traditions

Cultural Tradition	Interpretation of Illness	Healing Approach	Role of Nature
African Healing Systems	Illness as relational imbalance with ancestors or community	Herbal remedies combined with rituals and ancestral communication	Nature as a spiritual partner; plants as mediators
Traditional Chinese Medicine	Illness as disruption of vital energy	Herbal formulas harmonizing Yin-Yang and energetic patterns	Nature as an energetic system influencing the body
European Herbalism	Illness historically symbolic; now interpreted biochemically	Plant-based remedies with both chemical and symbolic influence	Nature as symbolic guide and chemical resource
Indigenous North American Traditions	Illness as rupture in relationships with land, people, or spirit	Ceremonies, songs, prayers, and plant allies restoring harmony	Nature as a living relative with spiritual agency

Source: [3,12].

Despite their contrasts, these diverse healing systems exhibit shared values: respect for the natural world, recognition of interconnectedness, and reliance on narrative and ritual communication. Differences arise in how illness is categorized spiritual imbalance, energetic disharmony, relational disruption, or physiological dysfunction yet the emphasis on holistic and meaningful engagement with nature is consistent.

Modern challenges introduce new ethical considerations. Issues such as cultural appropriation, commercialization of Indigenous knowledge, and threats to biodiversity raise serious concerns about justice and sustainability. Protecting traditional herbal knowledge requires culturally respectful collaboration, ecological stewardship, and equitable benefit-sharing.

Ensuring the continuity of global herbal traditions involves more than documenting remedies it demands honoring the communities that safeguard this wisdom. Integrating scientific research with cultural integrity and environmental preservation ensures that herbal medicine remains a living heritage capable of nurturing both present and future generations [14].

CONCLUSIONS

Herbal medicine, in its many cultural expressions, represents far more than a set of therapeutic practices. It embodies a complex system of communication through which communities articulate their understanding of health, illness, nature, and identity. Across continents and historical periods, the study reveals consistent patterns: herbal knowledge is transmitted orally, interpreted symbolically, and practiced within relational and spiritual frameworks that bind individuals to their environment. Whether in African, Asian, European, or Indigenous traditions, plants become mediators between the physical and metaphysical worlds, enabling healers and patients to engage in a dialogue that integrates bodily, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of well-being.

The research also demonstrates that interpersonal communication lies at the core of traditional healing. Relationships between healers and patients, between elders and apprentices, and between communities and the natural world serve as the channels through which medicinal knowledge and cultural values are preserved. This communicative process, grounded in trust, narrative, and ritual, ensures the continuity of traditional medicine across generations. Even today, these patterns influence how people use herbal therapies within modern health systems, sometimes creating gaps in disclosure and understanding when biomedical practitioners overlook cultural factors. A comparative

analysis of global traditions highlights both diversity and convergence. African healing emphasizes social and ancestral harmony, Asian systems focus on energetic balance, European herbalism blends symbolism with empirical inquiry, and Indigenous practices center on reciprocity with land and spirit. Despite these differences, all traditions place nature at the heart of healing whether conceptualized as a living relative, an energetic force, or a biochemical resource. This shared reverence underscores a universal recognition that human health cannot be separated from ecological and cultural contexts. In a contemporary world marked by globalization, biodiversity loss, and cultural transformation, the ethical preservation of herbal knowledge becomes increasingly urgent. Challenges such as cultural appropriation, commercialization without consent, and ecological degradation threaten the integrity and sustainability of traditional healing systems. Meaningful collaboration between biomedical institutions, traditional healers, researchers, and local communities must therefore prioritize cultural respect, ecological stewardship, and equitable benefit-sharing.

Ultimately, herbal medicine endures because it speaks a universal language one that connects people to their ancestors, to their environment, and to each other. Understanding herbal medicine as a cultural expression reveals that healing is not solely a biological process but a communicative act shaped by stories, symbols, relationships, and collective memory. By acknowledging and valuing these dimensions, modern health systems can engage in more inclusive, culturally grounded, and holistic approaches to human well-being.

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