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## The role of religion and traditional medicines in fighting COVID-19 in Tanzania

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The Tanzanian government attributes its self-ascribed success in tackling COVID-19 to the use of traditional medicines and religious prayer. Shauji Mpota describes these practices from the country's Lindi region, where the President's speeches and public messaging has shaped the health response.

*This blog is part of the series [Shifting Spaces](#), an emerging timeline of COVID-19 responses from Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda from the [LEAD research project](#) at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa.*

Tanzania reported the first case of the coronavirus on 15 March 2020. Since then, President Magufuli has declared that Tanzania has largely succeeded in reducing the infection of the virus and its effects,

specifically economic effects. On 16 June the President addressed parliament in capital city, Dodoma: 'we decided to face Coronavirus disease by putting God first, by so doing we have been able to solve this problem for large extent.'

In the early stages, COVID-19 was perceived as a dangerous, killer disease, a view attributed in part to the President's stance who, on 13 March, stressed to the nation its deadly nature and advised people to take serious measures to prevent infection. The majority of people in Tanzania thereafter began washing hands with water and soap, maintaining social distancing, wearing face masks and other activities outlined by the ministry of health to prevent infection. Indeed, shops, hospitals, banks and other service providers put buckets of water and soap at building entrances.

The President and the Ministry of Health also advised people to use local herbs to treat COVID-19 symptoms, emphasising that the virus has neither cure nor vaccine. In April 2020 the President appeared on the television explicitly **encouraging the use of local medicines**. The President also encouraged churches and mosques to respond to the virus and, in a speech the same month, he advised religious leaders of all faiths to conduct prayers with believers to ask **God's mercy**. This was a call he reiterated later, in a new stance which encouraged people not to be afraid: COVID-19 can be overcome through prayers. The speech eased people's fears about the virus being an abnormal disease and created new hope across the country.

## Shifting perceptions of COVID-19 in Lindi Region

Lindi Region is one of Tanzania's 31 administrative regions, home to approximately 1,004,439 people (2019 projections). It lies in the south-east of the country, with its eastern border facing out onto the Indian Ocean. The first case of coronavirus infection in Lindi region was reported in mid-April 2020 (the date is not certain). The case was

reported at a time when people had already started to take serious measures to combat the infection following the announcement of Tanzania's first case.

The perceptions and responses to coronavirus disease in Lindi region have shifted within the four months during which the virus has been knowingly present in Tanzania (March to June 2020). During the first months, especially from March to April, people in Lindi region perceived COVID-19 as a dangerous disease, causing deaths and hardships. People were also concerned that the government would adopt measures such as lockdowns, curfews and stay at home orders: measures which were even more dangerous than the disease itself, which could prevent people from earning their daily living. Since then, as elsewhere, fear of the virus in the Lindi Region has reduced.

## Traditional medicines as a cure

President Magufuli advised the people of Tanzania to **make use of traditional medicines**, announcing that his own son recovered from COVID-19 by incubating himself and drinking lemon and ginger juice. The use of local herbs was further encouraged by the Health Minister Ummu Mwalimu.

Local herbs have also been promoted by various herbalists and other health experts, who have shared video clips of themselves **preparing herbs** on various online channels such as **YouTube**, Clouds Media and Global TV Online, allowing people to **recreate the medicines themselves**. Thus, the use of herbs to treat the symptoms of COVID-19 has become widely known and practised across the nation.

When a person feels symptoms related to COVID-19 – such as a sore throat, a dry cough, chest pain – the patient or relatives might collect and/or buy lemon and ginger, blending them to prepare a juice. Patients and/or relatives have also prepared and boiled a combination of neem tree leaves, mango tree leaves, orange tree leaves and sometimes African

onion leaves. Patients are then incubated using the steam produced by this combination – a process known in Swahili as 'Kujifukiza'. The use of local herbs to treat the symptoms of COVID-19 has shaped people's life in Lindi region since April 2020, including the growth of markets for ginger and lemons.

While the majority believe that local herbs are effective treatments, others – including some educated youths and civil servants – are more sceptical, arguing that there is limited scientific evidence to support their use. Despite the fact that no one is certain whether reported symptoms are those of COVID-19 or other common illnesses, due to the absence of testing across the entire region, people in Lindi have been attributing the use of these local herbs to a reduction in the infection rate, and subsequent reduction in fear, creating new hope that the virus can be treated.

## The role of churches and mosques

Alongside the use of herbs, churches and mosques have played a significant role in responding to the coronavirus in Lindi region, which is mainly composed of Muslims and Christians. The Muslim population constitutes the majority, at around 65% of the total regional population, due to the influence of Arabs who interacted with Lindi communities/tribes such as Ngindo and Matumbi as early as the 7th century. The Christian population is approximated at 35%. Despite Lindi being a religious region, few attend churches and mosques and during this period of the coronavirus, churches and mosques remained attended by regulars.

Across the Lindi region, churches and mosques encouraged believers to follow the measures instructed by the Ministry of Health. However, they also organised serious prayers to ask God to save the community and the country from the virus. This began taking place from April 2020 onwards,

following the President's national call for every religion to conduct prayers against the disease.

Bishop Bruno Pius Ngonyani, of Roman Catholic diocese of Lindi, ordered all Roman Catholic Churches in the region to fast and hold prayers for nine days. This was 'Novena for heart of Christ' – Christian prayers practiced over a series of days, involving fasting and praying for a significant event. Novena was also conducted in a few Anglican churches, including the main Anglican church of Lindi. Churches have also encouraged similar prayers during periods of flooding, which occurred in Lindi region, specifically in Kilwa, Ruangwa and Liwale districts, at the end of January and early February 2020.

Father Hugo Heusinger, the parish priest of Roman Catholic Church for the parish of Nyangao, and another seven sub-parishes located in neighboring villages, explained that 'In our parish and sub parish churches, we had nine days of Novena prayers in March which were attended by all believers. Novena prayers were special for Coronavirus disease as we were asking God to protect our community and the country against the pandemic.' Throughout villages and small townships – such as Kilwa, Kipatimu, Pande, Kilwa-masoko, Kiwalala, Liwale and other areas – the majority were viewed as responding positively to Novena.

Other parishes did not hold Novena. Instead they practised normal prayers, but directed these towards the coronavirus. For example, most Anglican churches, including the small parish of Nyangao, added to the liturgical prayers to ask God to help overcome the epidemic.

Alongside prayers, in April and early May, some Roman catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches (the dominant denominations in the region) encouraged worshippers to offer charity, which was used to buy soap and buckets to be given to the poor and disabled. This was more evident in large parishes and churches located in Lindi town, such as Andrew Kagwa Roman Catholic and Saba Saba Roman Catholic churches.

Muslim leaders also encouraged believers to follow health instructions and led special prayers, called Qunut, among the five daily prayers for almost three months from March to May. Imam Salum Alli – the leader in Islam, mosque leader in Nyangao – explained that the Islamic religion has taught believers to conduct Qunut whenever society faces catastrophes such as killer diseases, drought and floods.

Qunut is a special supplication (dua) that Muslims perform during the daily obligatory standardised prayers (five salat) in order to ask for God's help regarding a serious problem. It involves the Imam reciting Arabic words taught by prophet Muhammad, in addition to words which specify the problem to be solved, such as diseases, floods or war. Whenever the Imam recites Qunut, followers reply by saying 'Amen'. Qunut can last for a number of days, weeks or months and it can be stopped at any time once the problem is seen to stop or decrease. It can also be carried out by individuals at home to ask for God's help. When the rate of COVID-19 spread was high in the country and Lindi Region – specifically in April – most mosques conducted Qunut to ask God to help overcome the virus.

Both Muslims and Christians believe prayers to have worked in Tanzania, attributing their prayers to a decreased rate of infection in the region. Surprisingly, these prayers have not been enacted for other diseases like HIV/Aids and diabetes. When I spoke with respondents in the region as to why this may be the case, they explained that COVID-19 was an exceptional virus. Indeed, the coronavirus has been perceived differently from other diseases, such as Ebola and HIV/AIDS, mainly due to the fact that no other virus has affected Europeans and Americans to a greater extent than Africans. This has made many people think that the virus is more dangerous than others faced in the past.

## Shifting perceptions amid a lack of testing

President Magufuli's speeches have been significant in shaping perceptions of the coronavirus across Tanzania. They have also been

significant in emphasising the role that traditional medicine and prayer should play in a landscape of response to the virus. In Lindi Region, the response to COVID-19 has taken form around both of these aspects and shaped both local markets and local worshipping practices. But despite the government hailing these strategies a success, doubts still exist among many that the virus has been eradicated, in both Lindi region and the nation at large. Indeed, despite the government reporting that there have been no cases of the coronavirus in Lindi region since May, myself and a significant majority are of the view that it still exists in our region, but at a small rate compared to the early months (March and April). We are of this view given that there has been no testing in the region from the outset, and thus undiagnosed cases are likely. In this light, it remains to be seen whether traditional medicine and specialised worshipping practices will return as a significant element of life in Lindi should reinfections visibly reemerge.

*Photo: Jorge Cancela (CC BY 2.0)*

### About the author



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Shauji Saidi Mpota is a BA graduate majoring in History and Geography subjects from the University of Dar es salaam (UDSM) College of Social Sciences and Humanities in 2018. Currently he is a History teacher and member of the History Department at Nyangao high school located in a small township of Nyangao in Lindi Region-Tanzania.

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