

## ABSTRACT

### **Health and illness in a rural community: A study of Traditional Health Care Practises in the parish of St Thomas, Jamaica.**

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Health care for the peoples of the Caribbean, including Jamaica, is overtly dependent on Western Biomedical Sciences and their practitioners but in Jamaica, studies confirm that Traditional Health Care, grounded in the cultural practises, continues to be utilized in spite of the availability of the formal health care services (Wedenoja 1978; Barret 1976; Beckwith 1969; Cohen 1953). It could be argued that the continued use of the Traditional Health Care System is dependent on the layman's understanding of health concepts. This study focuses on the identification of concepts of health and illness, how they are culturally constructed and expressed through health care practises, in a rural community.

#### **The Research Setting**

The community of Kings Court is situated about twenty miles from Morant Bay, the main town in St. Thomas, a rural parish of Jamaica. The community is geographically isolated from other nearby communities by distance terrain and vegetation. The community is loosely divided into three separate sections with loose boundaries, the first consist of prefabricated homes referred to as the 'scheme' and where many of the professionals reside. The second section of the community is referred to as 'Ackee walk' and is characterised by rented and leased lands. Finally, there is the commercial district, predominantly consisting of shops selling consumables.

## **Data Gathering Methods**

Participant observation and in-depth interviews were the main data gathering methods used over the duration of the study, between 1993-1999. The data was recorded using tape recordings, written notes and video-tapes where appropriate and were later transcribed using Microsoft Word.

## **Results**

In Kings Court health is perceived in a utilitarian manner, related to the ability to carry out daily activities. Bodily functions provide useful clues for the evaluation of health status. Other concepts of health include 'good living' and 'living good', the former having to do with material comforts while the latter refer to healthy social relations in the community. The quality of food consumed contributes significantly to one's health status.

Illnesses are placed into two categories, natural and unnatural, the former to be treated with pharmaceuticals, by the doctor or individually with 'bush'. The latter, unnatural illness, is believed to be caused by 'duppy' or spiritual entities and is treated by traditional practitioners using rituals, herbs and consecrated oils.

**Conclusion:** People value their health and are positively oriented to taking action to maintain their health status through rituals like the healing ceremonies and baptism.

**KEY WORDS:** Health, Illness, Ritual, Healing, traditional health care.