



Book Review

Caribbean Healing Traditions: Implications for Health and Mental Health

Karen Naidoo

Global Citizenship Education and Health in the Anglo-Caribbean
Tutor / Lecturer, Caribbean Studies Certification
Ryerson University, Toronto

Chevannes, Paulette, Roy Moodley and Patsy Sutherland. 2013. *Caribbean Healing Traditions: Implications for Health and Mental Health*. Edited by Pauletta Chevannes, Roy Moodley and Patsy Sutherland. New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

How to cite

Karen Naidoo. 2021. Book Review - Caribbean Healing Traditions: Implications for Health and Mental Health. *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 15: 161–168

Chevannes, Moodley and Sutherland (editors) examine the importance of traditional healing practices for Caribbean people both within the region and the diaspora. Chapters in the book establish that mental health illness and healing in the Caribbean are defined in cultural terms, which are often in conflict with the Western medical paradigm. *Caribbean Healing Traditions* is unique when compared to other books that examine mental health because it outlines the shifts in traditional mental healthcare healing practices; also, it maps out how these shifts are overarching and continue to inform the interpretation of health both within the Caribbean and abroad.

The book is divided into four major sections: 1) The history, philosophy and development of Caribbean healing traditions; 2) Caribbean traditional healing and healers; 3) Spirituality, religion, and cultural healing; and 4) Traditional healing and conventional health and mental health. As part of Section 1, the introduction sets the tone for all book chapters, emphasizing the importance of the historical forced and voluntary migration processes in the Caribbean. The introduction offers Caribbean history, which includes the “process of colonialism, slavery, indentureship and the plantation economy which all worked to shape and reshape healing methods in the Caribbean” (6). The introduction anchors the cultural complexities out of which Caribbean traditional healing practices emerged and, in doing so, provides the reader with a roadmap of what to expect in the remainder of the book.

Section 2 highlights the role of Caribbean healers and traditional healing in the region. Authors in this section offer a wonderful examination of some of the realities and myths around spirituality and its connections to traditional healing. The seven chapters that make up this section complement one other, as they each provide a culturally diverse perception of how connected and disconnected the Caribbean islands are in religious and healing practices. For instance, in chapter six, Ghislene Meance illustrates how “Vodou” practice, which is spiritual, can be an effective tool in health and mental health care in the West (17). In this chapter, particular focus was paid on examining how some

“Haitian immigrants integrate mental health services and vodou healing” (18). In chapter eight, Camille Hernandez-Ramdwar explores La Regla de Ocha (Santería) an Afro-Cuban religion and the role it plays in healing in Cuban communities. The diversity offered by each chapter captures the cultural, linguistic and religious richness that is deeply embedded in Caribbean traditional medicinal practices.

The third section brings focus to contemporary elements of spiritual practices in the region, such as Rastafarism, Hinduism and Islam that are often in conflict with the dominant ideologies of Christianity. The authors in this section are cognizant of the overpowering influence that Christian teachings have on the Western health model, which is also not divorced from the plantation economy (153). For instance, the influence that colonial political ideology had on psychopathology and mental health is evident in the context of the plantation economy when slaves and indentured servants “attempted to run away from their dehumanizing conditions, they were diagnosed with drapetomania¹” (Cartwright, 1851, as cited in Sutherland, 23). This section beautifully demonstrates that Eurocentric forms of medical practices have positioned other spiritual and religious notions of healing as rooted in evil and therefore demonic and invalid to the biomedical model of psychology.

Caribbean Healing Traditions concludes by sorting through some of the complexities of professional training in Western psychiatry settings. Gerard Hutchinson argues that the current training in psychiatry ignores Caribbean Indigenous or traditional healing methods that include herbal medicine, meditation and non-Eurocentric spiritual beliefs. This final section is a powerful assertion of the interconnection of mental health and spirituality. The book’s uniqueness is the consideration afforded to the tensions between Western medical practices and herbal forms of healing that deter many Caribbean people, regardless of where they are globally located, from accessing care.

I appreciated the first two chapters' layout of the colonial histories and the development of the Caribbean. The first part of the book is a solid overview of the importance of herbal and traditional practices during the colonial period. Many herbs or "bush medicines" were integrated into the region through the migration of various peoples. These chapters document how many slaves and indentured labourers did not have access to formal medicine under the colonial rule, and became reliant on informal methods of healing. The dependence on informal medicine also grants a voice to the role that Voodoo and Obeah play in Caribbean peoples' belief systems. The alternative methods of medicine that were in contention to the European Christian ideologies created influential narratives over the authority over the body, non-Christian practices and meanings of "madness" both in the Caribbean and the diaspora. Caribbean people still continue to carry colonial scars and "Current health care practices must reflect a consciousness of [Caribbean peoples'] histories and realities in order to meet the needs of this population" (4).

One of the strengths of the book is that it addresses the Caribbean as a whole, thus examining the Anglo, French, Dutch and Spanish Caribbean collectively, highlighting the similarities and differences that they all share. It emphasises the complications of various races, classes and genders. Most texts often compose the Caribbean as being primarily an Afro-exclusive space. *Caribbean Healing Traditions* brings awareness to the influences that Indo-Caribbean, Chinese, Europeans and Indigenous peoples all have on the region and their shared understandings of health and healing. Further, authors in this volume fill the gap by providing written accounts of the collective oral histories because most healing practices that migrated or originated in the Caribbean are based on oral history and lack documentation.

Although the authors provided indepth explanations of how healing practices have changed in the region over time, I would have liked the book to include more of an emphasis on mental health issues for those living abroad. It is important to recognize that though Caribbean people are a part of a shared

history, after migration their experience of issues such as depression and addiction, differ from those of their host country's dominant population as a result of race, isolation and the growing levels of poverty in densely populated racialized immigrant communities. The final chapter of the book describes the experiences for those living in the diasporic communities but leaves the reader wanting more information. In the final chapter, Roy Moodley and Michele Bertrand gave a brilliant account of some of the tensions with Western medicinal practices experienced by Caribbean people on the whole. The chapter could have benefited further by suggesting how biomedical methods of healing can be better strengthened by bridging more of an inclusive care system as exemplified in Cuba's model of care (Glazier, 245). Nevertheless, *Caribbean Healing Traditions* is a wonderful resource, which provides much needed work around illness, madness and healing within the Caribbean context.

This book would be a useful text for courses in Health, Sociology, Education, Indigenous or Caribbean studies. In spite of the complexities of the subject that each of the four sections present, the book is well organized, and well written, thus making it accessible to readers of varying academic levels. It is a useful resource that lays the foundation for diverse meanings of health and illness.

References

Cartwright, Samuel Adolphus. 1851. "Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race." *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, 7: 651-715.

Robertson, Lynne. "Book Review: Racism in the Canadian University." 2012. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 57, 4: 502-505.

¹ Drapetomania was described by an American physician Cartwright, as a disease of the mind. According to Cartwright the preventative method to such an illness is whipping the devil out of them (708).



<http://sta.uwi.edu/crgs/index.asp>