ForeWord Reviews

HEALTH & FITNESS

Hoodoo Medicine: Gullah Herbal Remedies

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In relatively few pages, this book tackles an extraordinarily involved question: How does a culture develop its unique approach to healing? Author and medical anthropologist Mitchell provides us with insights by examining the medicinal practices of the Gullah people of the South Sea Islands who settled off the coast of South Carolina. The Gullah people are African-Americans descended from slaves who developed a distinct dialect and folk heritage due to their unique geographical isolation. Since as late the 1960s these islands were unreachable except by boat, so the Gullah learned to rely on herbal remedies for the treatment of illness, both physical and spiritual.

The first section of the book briefly relates the history of the Gullah people and provides facts and hypotheses as to how they developed their medical practices. The second part of the book lists specific plants and cures in an easy-to-read format. As a comparative study of Gullah herbal remedies to other African-American remedies, and Native American, European or official pharmacopoeia guidelines, this book is an invaluable resource. Tidbits of folklore are scattered throughout this section as well.

This book, however, should be referenced only as an ethno-botanical history, not as an index of practical remedies. The information provided on specific plant use is too scant unless the reader has prior botanical and herbal knowledge. For example, when citing information about wild black cherry (Prunus serotina), the book states “A tea made from the bark relieves arthritic pains.” Whether the tea was used internally or externally, how strong to make the tea and how frequently to administer it is not mentioned. Nor is information given on how to prepare the tea, when to gather the bark and whether to use the root bark or the inner bark of the cambium layer. This information is crucial to any actual herbal remedy, and it is a great loss it was not included more liberally throughout the text.

Though the practical value of this book may be diminished by this lack of specific therapeutic information, the historical value is significant and certainly makes this slim treatise worth reprinting.

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