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Kenyan churches say herbs threaten HIV/AIDS patients

by Fredrick Nzwili by Religion News Service

NAIROBI, Kenya — Church leaders are pressing the Kenyan government to scientifically test herbal medicines that are used by millions to manage and treat diseases, saying the nontraditional therapies could be putting patients' health at risk.

The leaders say HIV/AIDS patients and others suffering chronic conditions are widely using the medicines, whose efficacy is unknown.

"We are urging the government to test the medicines in modern laboratories so that citizens can be advised scientifically about what they are taking. That's a challenge we are also throwing to universities," former Anglican Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi told reporters Oct. 15.

The natural medicines are so popular that some churches are advising their congregations and people with AIDS to use them to boost their immunity, alongside standard anti-retroviral medicines, Nzimbi said.

Sometimes, that advice is being interpreted to mean that sick people should abandon their medicine in favor of the herbs, according to Nyabuto Marube, an evangelical church leader.

"That's the risk," he said. "They should not be seen as replacements for modern medicines, but as supplements for now."

The Rev. Gideon Byamugisha, the Ugandan Anglican priest who in 1992 became the first African religious leader to declare he was HIV-positive, told an Oct. 15 medical conference how he had used herbs to fight opportunistic infections.

"When I became sick in 1998, a time when there were no ARVs, I used garlic to fend off infections," Byamugisha said. "There are many herbs in use, but we also need to know how they combine with

modern medicines."

A "miracle herbal cure" allegedly discovered in 2010 by a retired Lutheran pastor, Ambilikile Mwasapile, recently attracted more than 4 million pilgrims within a year.

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