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Zeutegueu, above center, a healer who lives in Batié, Cameroon, with his family, including two of his three wives. (Photos by Jiro Ose for the International Herald Tribune)

Where traditional customs can mean AIDS

By Elisabeth Rosenthal

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An estimated 70 percent of Africans use traditional healers as their primary source of health care, a function of tradition and availability.

In Africa, there is one medical doctor for every 40,000 people, but one healer for every 500.

Healers' practices vary widely from place to place, Mills said, and often involve cutting, the administration or injection of herbal medicines, and the practice of siphoning blood.

"We're used to saying this is all about sexual intercourse, but now we have to remind people it can be elsewhere in the body, and there are other dangers as well," said Bertrice Mabule, who started the Children's Education and Health Foundation to promote HIV awareness in Batié.

A 2004 study in the journal *Tropical Doctor* by Dr. Etete Peters at the University of Calabar in southeastern Nigeria concluded that there was "a serious risk inherent in the practices of Nigerian traditional healers" because of "the continuous usage of unsterilized instruments and cross contamination of patients' blood and body fluid in their practices."

Though Peters has continued to work with the healers, he said there was little funding to carry out HIV sensitization campaigns directed at this group, so "such awful practices persist in Nigeria and Africa in general."

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In much of rural Cameroon, tiny scars are made to identify members of different ethnic groups, with large numbers of children scarred simultaneously.

"You see them everywhere, three lines on a cheek, on the forehead - the pygmies make slashes between the eyebrows. It's a real worry," said Serge Florent Moudt, an HIV educator who works at the Center in Yaoundé as well as in the West Province, his home.

If just one child in a village had HIV, a common blade could spread the virus to dozens who come after him. The same is true for group circumcisions.

"There are traditionally African aspects of this fight," said Jean Stéphane Biatcha, executive secretary of African Synergy, an AIDS prevention group that focuses on women and children.

"We're taking the message to rural areas where traditions are very strong, and you have to work carefully and slowly."

Another traditional practice that government officials acknowledge could be spreading HIV is communal breast-feeding, the norm in many rural villages.

Polygamy is legal in Cameroon and a chieftain might have 30 or 40 wives, Biatcha said, since wealthy men routinely marry the wives of male relatives who have died.

And it usual for the wives - or even friends - to help out by nursing each others' infants. In fact, it is an essential service if a mother has to go to work or take a trip into the city.

But again, in a country where studies have found that 11 percent of women of child-bearing age are infected with the AIDS virus, the practice presents an open conduit for childhood infections.

Biatcha said people were generally unaware of such risks, so the first step was information.

In the last few years, an increasing number of medical doctors have warmed to collaborating with the traditional healers, both to encourage safe practice and to use them as AIDS educators.

"We have to open a dialogue with the traditional healers," Mills, the epidemiologist, said. "They may well be spreading HIV, but instead they could be part of the solution."

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