

## Turning to traditional healers to help stop the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone

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Many people in eastern Sierra Leone turn to traditional healers like Fallah James before going to a hospital. The Red Cross is working with traditional healers to help stop the spread of the Ebola virus. Photo: Katherine Mueller, IFRC

*Katherine Mueller, IFRC*

In a land where voodoo, witchcraft and curses are the norm, Fallah James is a sought-after man. As a traditional healer in Sierra Leone's eastern Kailahun district, people turn to him for treatment before they even consider crossing the threshold of a hospital or health care clinic. "I cure people who are said to have been cursed. Headaches, or if you have a broken leg, I can cure that," explains James. "And in Africa, here we say this person has witchcraft behind him. I can drive that out."

There are more than 200 traditional healers in Kailahun district, all of whom use a combination of concoctions, powders, plants and touch to heal the aches and pains of people in their communities. For James, all that changed when the Ebola virus disease arrived. "Upon the outbreak of Ebola in Sierra Leone, when I got the information that you can get it through contact, I, as the head of the traditional healers in this district, have stopped treating patients," says James. "And I have been advising my colleagues that they should stop for now, until we get training and proper information about Ebola, so that it cannot infect so many people in our community."

As a Muslim, James is not allowed to eat monkey, a customary meal for many in this part of Sierra Leone, and a possible source of the Ebola virus. Instead, he feeds his two wives and nine children on other bush meat like deer, antelope, squirrels and porcupine. But with messages being shared by the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society and other organizations to avoid preparing and eating bush meat, James has radically changed his diet, opting to refrain from touching any bush meat, feeding on fish instead. "It is challenging to find enough fish for us to eat," says James. "It has to come from some distance away."

Admitting he knows very little about Ebola, James welcomes an opportunity to learn, and has offered to gather his fellow traditional healers for an awareness raising discussion with the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society. As a traditional healer since birth, "I was born with leaves in my hand, following on a tradition inherited by my father and his father," people listen when he speaks. He and his colleagues are revered leaders in their communities. With many isolated communities still shunning anyone remotely connected to the Ebola outbreak, either those who are infected or those who are there to help, the Red Cross hopes that engaging this group of traditional healers will assist in sharing the right kind of information. "Having people accept and understand information about Ebola is key to stopping this outbreak," says Raul Paredes, deputy head of

Ebola operations for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Sierra Leone. "We cannot do it on our own, which is why it is critical to engage with community leaders, be they traditional healers or religious leaders."

IFRC is increasing its response to the Ebola outbreak, launching a [revised emergency appeal](#) to support the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society in assisting more than 6 million people at risk of being affected by the outbreak. Activities focus on raising awareness about how Ebola spreads and how people can protect themselves, providing psychosocial support to those affected by the disease, and managing the burial of bodies.

### **Red Cross Engages Traditional Healers to Raise Ebola Awareness**

<http://www.redcross.org/news/article/Red-Cross-Engages-Traditional-Healers-to-Raise-Ebola-Awareness>



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