

The Use of Herbs as an Alternative Method of Healing in Contemporary Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Africa has been highly affected by Western influence but in spite of the massive pressure of western civilisation, Africans still practice traditional healing. This paper is set out to analyse the reasons why traditional healing is relevant to contemporary Nigeria. However, emphasis is placed on Yorùbá herbal medicine as a means of healing. It discusses the nature of Yorùbá herbal medicine and reasons why it is unique as a means of healing. The paper employs relevant literature on the subject of Yorùbá herbal medicine, places special attention on the contemporary relevance of the use of herbs and examines the reasons why people prefer traditional herbs to orthodox medicine or use herbs simultaneously with orthodox medicine. The challenges hindering the use of Yorùbá herbal medicine are highlighted, and relevant recommendations are made to enhance the use of Yorùbá herbal medicine. The theoretical framework for this paper is the Pragmatic theory of Truth of Hilary Putnam. Pragmatism is a practical approach to issues that is optimistic, in which a concept is justified in its ability to work and in this case, herbal medicine and its practical relevance today.

Key Words: Herbs, Yorùbá, Alternative method, Healing, Contemporary Nigeria.

Introduction

The Western world has played a significant role in African History. In fact, westernisation has left some permanent marks in the course of our history. Western religious influence has changed some of our traditional beliefs and philosophy. Christianity brought many aspects of western culture and ideas about society to Nigeria, at the detriment of the beliefs passed down to us by our forefathers. Historians have made us to understand that converts were expected to abandon indigenous religion and various aspects of their culture.ⁱ One of the many significant changes taking place on the African continent today is the emergence and development of urban communities whose character has been highly influenced by patterns and products from the western world.ⁱⁱ Not only was European religion presumed to be higher than African religion, but European values and institutions were considered to be superior to those of the African. We were made to believe that our values, beliefs and institutions were inferior, therefore, we abandoned various aspects of our culture; we changed our names, our modes of dressing, and our objects of worship, community systems and many other different aspects of our ways of life.

However, in spite of this enormous pressure of western civilisation, there are certain aspects of our lives that refuse to be swayed. The subscription to traditional means of healing has been persistent in our history; traditional medicine is still very much a part of our system. Although the use of orthodox



medicine is more pronounced and is readily acceptable as the conventional means of healing, the presence and use of traditional methods of healing is undeniable in our society today. Why is it so? Why do people still subscribe to the traditional means of healing? Why do people use traditional medicine alongside orthodox medicine? What are the advantages or reasons why some people prefer traditional healing to orthodox medicine? And finally, what are the challenges to the use of traditional medicine for the modern man? These are the questions this paper is poised to address. However, the Yorùbá traditional healing, centering on the use of herbs, shall be the main focus of this paper.

The Yorùbá Traditional Healing System

The traditional healing system forms an integral part of the Yorùbá society which has been traced to the deities. The Yorùbá believe that this healing system was given to them by the Deities; *Ọ̀rúnmilà* and *Ọ̀sányìn*. *Ọ̀rúnmilà* was skillful in the healing arts being both a diviner and a teacher.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result of this, the art of healing in the Yorùbá traditional sense is traced to the deities; for the art of healing and for the necessary skills to perform healing. The healing occupation in Yorùbá society are professionals in the sense that the practitioners belong to societies that attest to the competence of their members and medical knowledge is also often passed on within families.^{iv} These traditional healers are professionals and even though some are born into the family of healers coupled with the fact that their progenitors were also healers, they still undergo the learning process. Professional medicine men and women are

known as *Oníṣẹ̀gùn* and the training for *Oníṣẹ̀gùn* involves observation and memorisation of the names of herbs and prescriptions. Women also play important roles in the Yorùbá concept of healing and medicine. Women offer healing services in their capacities as healers and cultic functionaries, especially in the area of childcare.^v

However, it is necessary at this point to make some distinctions. In the west, traditional medicine refers to orthodox medicine, which is the medicine carried out by a doctor who has undergone training in a medical school. Alternative medicine on the other hand, is a generic term used to describe any other approach that employs principles and methods that are different from those of orthodox medicine. In the contemporary Yorùbá society, traditional medicine refers to the age-old holistic, non-western approach to medicine.^{vi} This non-western approach to medicine, which the Yorùbá call traditional, shall be the line of emphasis in this paper.

According to Buckley, Yorùbá medicine is similar to European medicine in that its main thrust is to kill or expel from the body, tiny, invisible “germs” or insects (*kòkòrò*) and also worms (*aràn*) that inhabit small bags within the body.^{vii} Traditional medicine is also defined as including diverse health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal, and/or mineral based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises applied singularly or in combination to maintain well-being, as well as to treat, diagnose or prevent illness.^{viii} The art of healing among the Yorùbá is also seen as connected to magic. Magic and medicine



are closely related and one is often mistaken for the other. Both names are *Oògùn*, *Egbòogi* or *Ìṣẹ̀gùn*. Also, similar materials are used in their preparations, and these include herbs, leaves, roots, barks, stems, flowers, feathers, bones, water and many other substances which might be gaseous, solid or liquid.^{ix} In addition to this, Yorùbá traditional healers use a combination of herbs, specific food items and Yorùbá cosmology to treat their patients.^x

Sacrifice is a healing method on its own and diviners are specialists in this area. They may not even make use of herbs before healing takes place therefore; the efficacy of herbs does not depend entirely on sacrifice before it works. According to a traditional healer, sacrifice in some cases, is what makes medicine work. Sacrifice includes killing animals and distributing meat as well as giving something of value such as precious cloth, which is related to the idea of placating opposing forces.^{xi} Sacrifice also comes in, if and when the illness is spiritual. This is done when certain problems defy ordinary solutions, which may be sickness. Sacrifice do not only solve problems, but also is a sign of appreciation.^{xii}

Theoretical Foundation

The Pragmatic Theory of Truth of Hilary Putnam is a factual expression of traditional medicine and its relevance today in Nigeria. Hilary Putnam is an American analytic philosopher and a pragmatist. Pragmatic theory of truth is an approach to value that allows for the use of thick evaluative concepts which allows for a space of reasons. This approach allows for human common sense and intuitive reasoning. It is a

comparative value judgment in which concepts are evaluated by considering their functions and practices. According to Putnam, truth in our ideas means their ability to work; truth is what works.^{xiii} Herbal medicine is true today because it works and the *modern man* patronises it. A pragmatic approach to traditional medicine is a realistic and sensible approach towards it in a contemporary Nigerian society. We cannot deny the relevance of traditional medicine especially herbs today, although there are obvious challenges such as control, safety, efficiency, integration and spiritual elements in some cases, among others. Herbal medicine serves a practical purpose and as far as both the practitioners and their clientele are concerned, it works and they are comfortable with it.

In addition to this fact, the uniqueness of Yorùbá traditional healing, which includes holistic healing, healing beyond the physical body has been established. Since herbal healing is the main fulcrum of this paper, the direction of discourse is healing among the Yorùbá through the use of herbs. The distinction between orthodox medicine and what is understood as “traditional medicine” within this context will be made in the process of understanding why Yorùbá healing extends beyond physical healing.

The Yorùbá Use of Herbs for Healing

Ọmọdé kò mọ òdògùn, ó n pè é léfọ́.

(A child is ignorant of medicine, and he calls it vegetable)^{xiv}

The use of herbs and plants called *ewé* or *egbò* is very important and central to the healing system among the Yorùbá. Herbs are



picked for medicinal and spiritual empowering purposes. In the Yorùbáland, herbs are gathered by priests, herbalists or anyone who knows what to do with the herbs. The herbs are made available to the population either through private practice or they can be purchased in a market place.^{xv} It is worthy to note here that the use of herbs for healing is expressed in two ways; It could be specific, in that the herbalist gathers the herbs specifically for a particular person to cure an ailment. It could also be general, when the herbalist gathers the herbs for different ailments without any particular person in mind. Such are the ones bought in public places, which the buyers request for when buying from the herb sellers based on what the ailment is.

As beneficial as herbs are to man, they could also be very harmful. Thus, plants usage must be handled with care. Some can be of great therapeutic use, while others can be poisonous. In the real sense, plants are not harmful if one knows their usage. Those ones that are considered harmful and poisonous are beneficial and useful for another form of healing. Plants are generally beneficial to man, depending on the experience of the user and what each plant is used for. There are some plants whose roots are good for consumption, while their leaves are poisonous e.g Yellow yam (*Iṣu igángán*). Parts of plant or a whole plant is claimed as used in the treatment of disease like high blood pressure, pile, dysentery, infertility, convulsion, fever-malaria, typhoid or yellow, cough, sore throat, skin diseases, ulcer, measles, chicken pox, small pox, fibroid, rheumatism and other diseases.^{xvi} Today, many traditional



healers make claims that certain herbs can cure certain diseases. However, attesting to these claims or refuting them is not the goal of this paper, but analysing the general relevance of Yorùbá traditional healing to the contemporary Nigeria.

The following are common examples of medicinal herbs among the Yorùbá and their botanical names:

<i>Èpàlkún</i>	- <i>TinosporaCordifolia</i>
<i>ÈyìnOlobe</i>	- <i>PhyllantusAmarus</i>
<i>Òrúwọ</i>	- <i>Morindalucida</i>
<i>Madùnmaro</i>	- <i>CongronemaLatifolium</i>
<i>Ahùn</i>	- <i>AlstoniaBoonei</i>
<i>Orógbó</i>	- <i>Garcinia kola</i>
<i>ImiEşú</i>	- <i>ArgerantumConzoides</i>
<i>Emilẹ</i>	- <i>EurphobiaHirtha</i>
<i>Asofóyeje</i>	- <i>RanwolfiaVotitoria</i>
<i>Abèèrè</i>	- <i>PicrilimaNitida</i>
<i>Ejìrìn</i>	- <i>MarmodicaCharantia</i>
<i>Ìyeyè</i>	- <i>SpondiasMombin</i>
<i>Efirin</i>	- <i>OcimumGratissimum</i>
<i>Ègbèṣì</i>	- <i>NucleaLatifollia</i>
<i>Ipín</i>	- <i>FicusExasperata</i> . ^{xvii}

Different parts of plants like leaves, roots or barks are made into medicine and these are collected around the house, along road side, on the farm, thick forest, secondary forest, savanna, water surface and from many other sources. Their preparation into medicine can be in form of concoction (*àsèje*), decoction (when *àgbo* is boiled to extract medicine), infusion (when *àgbo* is soaked in water), these can be charred, ground



into powder, and their leaves can also be squeezed. Liquids like water (hot or cold), alcohol, lime water, palm wine, pap “sour water” (*ẹ̀kanògì*) and soft drinks are examples of common constituents.^{xviii}

The Relevance of Yorùbá Traditional Healing for Contemporary Nigeria

Today, traditional medicine forms an integral part of the healing system. In Nigeria, the Yorùbá healing methods are important though a subtle but operative means of healing because people still subscribe to them as their primary source of healing or sometimes to corroborate the orthodox healing. People, regardless of age, education or profession, patronise traditional medicine especially the common herbs easily accessible in public places. In Nigeria today, traditional medicine has undergone series of metamorphosis to suit the needs of its subscribers and it is practiced in a way that the *modern man* can easily subscribe to. It is also interesting to note that it is not only rural dwellers or illiterates that patronise the herb sellers especially those in public places. According to Àkàngbé, a good number of her customers are *alákòwés* (the elites or educated people), commercial motor cycle riders (*Òkádà men*) and commercial drivers as well as other members of the public.^{xix}

Traditional medicine is changing in Africa in response to development in other parts of the socio economic system. Modernisation has affected the ways in which many traditional practitioners operate, traditional healers have begun to adopt many of the practices of modern health care, and they now

operate in modern clinical facilities with waiting rooms, with the use of stethoscope and keep record cards. The practitioners are becoming professionals and sometimes refer cases to each other.^{xx} Modernisation of traditional medicine has made it easier for the modern man to relate to and apply as a means of healing because gone are the days when traditional healers are ill-kempt or operate in filthy environments. Today, traditional healers now have websites or blogs which they use to advertise their vocation and connect with their clientele.

African herbal medicine is also popular outside the continent and it is popularly accepted in some places, over orthodox medicine. Currently, many health food stores, in connection with African Herbal medicine, sell *ewé* (herbs) in powder, leaf and capsule form.^{xxi} Traditional healing in Yorùbá land and other parts of present day Nigeria, are as ingrained in the culture as marriage. They were developed as a result of interactions with clients over the years and have remained until today.^{xxii} Traditional healing, in spite of the enormous pressure of civilization, is still an important part of our society. Traditional healing contributes immensely to the health care delivery system of the Yorùbá. Rather than being swept away by the tides of civilisation or modernisation, courtesy of the western world, traditional healing has remained and it has adopted modern methods to enhance its delivery.

The cost of orthodox medical care is a major reason why people subscribe to traditional healing. It is not everyone that can afford health care in hospitals today. The history of western medical care in Nigeria shows the journey in medical cost from



the days of European missionaries to where we are today. According to Moddikkoh, modern medical care (orthodox medicine) cost, started from initial free care, especially in the mission facilities to small charges. Then the cost started getting excessively expensive to the point of surpassing that of the traditional services. This fact, coupled with the steady decline of both the accessibility and the quality of the care delivered in these modern facilities, made it necessary for the return to the detested traditional medicine. Now the surge is real and dramatic.^{xxiii} An indirect reference to the fact that traditional medicine was abandoned before can be argued, because in spite of civilisation, Africans never let go of the art of healing that was passed down from one generation to another. Therefore, there was really no “return”, because traditional healing has always been an integral part of the African traditional system. However, it is true that the cost of orthodox medicine is a boost to the patronage of traditional medicine.

Another major reason why traditional medicine is relevant and highly beneficial to the contemporary Nigeria is the incessant strike actions of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA is the association of medical doctors in Nigeria). According to a recent report in the Newspaper; The headline; Doctors’ Strike Paralyzes Hospital Activities Nationwide.

The directive by the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) to embark on an indefinite nationwide strike has elicited total compliance by doctors across the country. As a result, health



care delivery service... was paralysed at various government hospitals and health care centers nationwide.^{xxiv}

As a result of this, a lot of patients who were already in the hospitals would seek alternatives; private hospitals or traditional medicine. Those who cannot afford the former will go for the latter.

Yorùbá traditional healers are very unique and they are quite different from orthodox medical practitioners. These traditional healers perform the roles of medical practitioner, psychiatrist, pharmacist, herbal dispenser, consultant, orthopaedist, paediatrician, obstetrician, anaesthetist, mediator, family counselor, psychotherapist and interventionist in daily interaction with their clients.^{xxv} This shows that the Yorùbá healers cover nearly, if not all, the various fields in orthodox medicine. At the same time, some of these healers focus on a special line of healing which is seen as their specialty, an example is the traditional bone setters or traditional midwives (*agbèbí*), and at times they are versatile in more than one area.

Another reason why Yorùbá traditional healing is relevant today is its ability to perform holistic healing. Yorùbá traditional medicine does not only heal the physical ailment, but it also ensures the healing of the spiritual part of the patient. While western medicine is only occupied with one function; getting rid of the symptoms; African medicine performs three distinct functions; getting rid of the symptoms, identifying and removing the causes of the illness and maintaining a holistic balance, including the spirit of the patient.^{xxvi}



On a similar note, there are evidences that Yorùbá traditional medicine is effective in the management of chronic illnesses. This traditional medicine is also used in the treatment of a range of health problems that western medicine does not treat adequately.^{xxvii} Sometimes, the traditional healers start their healing efforts where orthodox doctors stop. They treat such problems that defy western medical knowledge. According to Àdìgún, some of the people who patronise them are often people whose conditions defy western medicine. Such sicknesses are mysterious and they cannot be explained or treated physically but only through spiritual means^{xxviii}.

The fear of fake drugs associated with orthodox medicine is another reason why some people prefer traditional healing today. Buying a fake herb is quite rare and herbalists are always confident and sure of the sanctity and efficacy of their herbs. According to Àkàngbé, most of her customers buy *àgboibà* (malaria herbs) because they prefer them to orthodox malaria medicine because of its efficacy in curing malaria.^{xxix} *Bí oògùn ẹni bá dánílójú, à á fì gbárí ni.*^{xxx} (when one is confident of one's medicine, one can use it to beat one's head - which literally connotes boasting or confidence). This saying is a literal expression of the general attitude of herb sellers and practitioners to their products. They generally have a lot of confidence in the efficacy of their medicine.

According to a report by WHO, the statistics gathered reveal that the ratio of both medical doctors (orthodox) and traditional healers to the Nigerian population is *mind blowing*. In Nigeria, the ratio of medical doctors to the population was

1:16,400 while the ratio of traditional practitioners to the population was 1: 110. And this report shows that in Nigeria, the majority of the citizens still visit traditional practitioners for their health care needs.^{xxx1}

Today in Nigeria, herbs are readily accessible to everyone including low income earners, rural dwellers, professionals and the elites living in the suburbs. Herbs are sold on the streets, market places, motor parks, public mass transports and many other public places. They are hawked in big plastic bowls and transparent plastic containers with other liquids that will serve as constituents for prospective buyers. The herb sellers sometimes also display their wares in shops, in front of their houses and other permanent or semi-permanent structures. They are popularly called the following names, *Ìyáalágbo*, *Sisíalágbo*, *eléwéomọ* and so on. Herb selling is a source of income and a lucrative business for its sellers. According to an herb seller who prefers to be anonymous, she has built a house and sent her children to school from herbs and she makes good and regular profits from her herbs business^{xxxii}

Spiritual Dimension in the Yorùbá Use of Herb for Healing

This discourse would not be complete without mentioning a very important aspect of Yorùbá traditional healing through herbs, and this is the significant involvement of spiritual elements in the art of healing. Medicine, *oògùn* among the Yorùbá encompasses the use of herbs and the act of combining herbs with incantations and/or sacrifice. Healing in the Yorùbá parlance is not limited to physical wellness, rather, it encompasses, physical, spiritual and psychological wellness.^{xxxiii}



Herbs according to Yorùbá culture are spiritually empowered by Olódùmarè (the Supreme Being in Yorùbá belief) and they can be used for healing. It is also believed that each herb holds allegiance to one *Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀* (god) just as palm tree is peculiar with *Òrúnmilà* (divinity).^{xxxiv} On a similar note, according to Oláléyẹ, "herbs are not just ordinary leaves, they can hear and when harvesting them, they are told, - I want you to do so... so... so, in the life of XYZ, and it works. The herbs perform the healing required of them because they have been told what to do".^{xxxv} This means that herbs for the Yorùbá, comprise of both physical and spiritual elements, what connotes herb goes beyond what can be seen or touched.

According to Abimbólá (1997:72), Yorùbá medicine is closely connected with incantations and the use of powerful words. Sometimes if you do not utter these words, medicine does not come alive. Most of these utterances are called *Ofò*, *Ògèdè*, and *Áyájó* which have their roots in *Ifá*.^{xxxvi} Similarly, Olájúbú (2003:110-112), believes that the Yorùbá people perceive herbs as possessing life, names, taboo, and praise poem (*oríkì*), hence, to approach them, a special kind of knowledge is required.^{xxxvii} The title of "father of Yorùbá medicine" is accorded to *Òsányìn* (another Yorùbá divinity), who had the gift of communicating with plants. He also knew how to use the energy in plants to effect changes in human bodily conditions, which he did through chanting of sacred chants or potent speech.^{xxxviii} Although, in some cases, some of these herbs are purely natural herbs and they are prepared naturally without anything spiritual or mystical, herbs



purchased in public places are good examples of medicine that has nothing to do with incantations or powerful words.

The Yorùbá differentiate physical illness and mere absence of good health (*àìsàn*) from disease (*àrùn*). *Àìlera* could be any form of ordinary sickness. When an *àìlera* persists for too long, it is called *àmódi* (prolonged illness). A natural *àrùn* can result from germ or worm infection, and it is believed to have become a supernatural problem (*àrùnàfìṣe*) when it takes too long to be cured, these are contracted through food poisoning, curses, casting of spells and other means.^{xxxix} These are the kinds of ailments that orthodox doctors find difficult to treat and sometimes advise the relatives of the sick one to try other means of healing.

The element of mysticism or what is understood as spiritual elements in Yorùbá healing through the use of herbs is like a two-sided coin. It has its pros and cons. It is beneficial in the sense that ailments which defy orthodox medicine are cured and the patients' lives are rescued from death in the case of very grave conditions. However, this also poses a problem for some other groups of people who are not comfortable with traditional medicine, such people term traditional approach as “fetish” or “sorcery”. Such people are skeptics, they prefer to stick to what they see as the conventional means of healing - orthodox medicine, which they believe is free of spiritual elements.



Contemporary Challenges to the Use of Yorùbá Herbal Medicine

In spite of the importance and common usage of Yorùbá traditional medicine, there are still serious challenges hindering its general acceptability and patronage.

Presence of mysticism in some parts of Yorùbá herbal healing has made it difficult for some people to patronise traditional healers. Another challenge to the use Yorùbá herbal healing is a problem that is general to African traditional healing. This is the problem of integration. In many cultures, modern medicine complements traditional practices as typified by what is obtainable in China.^{xl} Nigeria, like other countries in Africa, is yet to integrate traditional healing into conventional health care delivery.

Although many traditional medicines and their therapies have promising potential, and are increasingly used, some of them are untested and their use not monitored. As a result, knowledge of their potential side-effects is limited.^{xli}

The issue of efficiency is another challenge for Yorùbá herbal healing today. Some people are still skeptical about the efficiency of herbs. Especially the fantastic claims of herbal healers with the use of radio, television, print media and other means of advertisement; the herbal healers make a lot of claims - some herbs are claimed to be able to heal several ailments (*awogbaàrùn*). These claims sometimes sound too good to be true. This is closely related to quality, which is another challenge to the use of herbs.

Another issue is that of standardisation, dosage and safety, which are all linked to control. An orthodox doctor is guided by certain standards, and his activities in the course of discharging his duties are controlled. These are lacking in Yorùbá herbal healing and they are serious setbacks for the promulgation of the use of traditional medicine. Although, the issue of dosage and safety is not a big issue to both practitioners and people who patronise herbal medicine, it only becomes a problem when using the standard of orthodox medicine. However, there is still a need for control especially for the sake of safety especially for herbal medicine to be able to compete with orthodox medicine in contemporary Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the issue at hand, it has been established that in spite of the colossal pressure of western civilisation which has so much influenced the African way of life, Africans still practice traditional healing. It has been established in this paper, that Yorùbá Herbal healing is still relevant today, even in this modern Nigeria. Yorùbá herbal healing is useful and beneficial to the modern man. However, the use of herbs for healing is still very far from being fully optimised. The federal government should be committed to making policies to improve and enhance the use of traditional healing. Relevant trainings should be made available to the traditional practitioners. At the same time, their activities should be monitored and controlled, this should be done in a way to help and support them, not to thwart their practice. Government should set up agencies to encourage and maximise the potentials



in Yorùbá herbal medicine. These agencies should include the traditional practitioners and trained personnel in health care delivery.

Finally, orthodox medicine should devise ways how it can work hand in hand with traditional medicine, especially herbal medicine, this is a pragmatic approach. The two health care providers can support one another and the populace will benefit from this symbiotic relationship. In spite of the various challenges associated with herbal medicine, we cannot deny its presence in a contemporary Nigerian society. It is functional as a method of healing; also, it is practical and realistic as far as any pragmatic *modern* man is concerned.

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