
AFRICAN MEDICINE: AN ALTERNATIVE TO ORTHODOX MEDICINE

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Abstract

The emergence of orthodox medicine which came through Africa's contact with western civilization diverted the attention of Africans from the use of African medicine to the use of orthodox medicine. The European colonizers for their economic gains condemned African medicine and refer to it as fetish, evil, inaccurate, ineffective, and superstitious. This paper seeks to make a case for a return to the homeopathic form of treatment with the use of African medicine as against allopathic (orthodox medicine) introduced to the continent. Though African medicine is characterized by some inadequacies, it is still better than orthodox medicine with an allopathic form of treatment and side effects. The paper argued that a more intensive effort if applied to African medicine, will make it capable of being a better alternative form of treatment for health issues in Africa. To this end, the paper suggests measures needed to strengthen Afro-medical practices and articulates the possible benefits of such an approach. The paper concludes that properly harnessed, African medicine has prospective end results as a form of alternative medicine in Africa.

Keywords: African Medicine, Herbal Medicine, Effectiveness, Disease, Illness

Introduction

Treatment of diseases and illnesses can be generally categorized into two major sub-fields, the homeopathic and the allopathic. A homeopathy is a form of treatment that uses non-orthodox or conventional drugs to treat diseases and illnesses. This form of

treatment considered the root cause of a disease or illness in order to avoid a possible reoccurrence. Allopathic deals with treatment of only the symptoms and signs of diseases and illnesses. Herbal medicine mostly used in Africa and other countries like India, China, and Africa falls under the homeopathic form of treatment. African medicine which this paper tends to propagate is an important aspect of the African cultural heritage which is yet to be critically explored by African scholars in order to make the world see its importance and effectiveness.

The existence of philosophy in Africa has been proven and it was confirmed by scholars that there was science and technology in Africa before the advent of Western civilization. Since Science is an offshoot of philosophy, the mother of all knowledge and medicine is a branch of science, we can say African Medicine is a branch of African Science. This is so because the early philosophers were also the early scientists. Orunmila of the Yoruba philosophy who was compared with Socrates by Sophie Oluwole was both a philosopher and a scientist (Oluwole, 2014). Democritus and Aristotle to mention just few were both philosophers and scientists during the ancient period in Greek city. In the Western world, philosophy and science stand on their separate way in the 18th century, but in Africa, science and philosophy still remain together and this was due to the common nature of the two bodies of knowledge (Russell, 2000). The nature of African Philosophy and African science that is still keeping them together is mystico-religious and spiritualism.

However, African medicine, which makes use of herbs and other items to cure illnesses, is a complete healing involving the use of some aspects of African spirituality. The use of African Medicine

was condemned by the Europeans during their stay in Africa and the practitioners of Africa Medicine (Traditional diviner-healers) were banned as well, because they were considered or tagged by Europeans as practitioners of witchcraft and magic; declared illegal by the colonial authorities, thereby creating a war against an aspect of the indigenous culture that were seen as witchcraft (Helwig, 2005). Just about two decades ago, the belief of Africans and Westerners on African Medicine started changing and people are now going into the practice of non-orthodox medicine, to the use of Herbs for treatments. I must not forget to mention here that there has been a great improvement on herbal medical practices. The improvement can be seen in terms of herbal administration, application, packaging etc., and as a result of this improvement, many Africans now prefer to use herbal medicine to cure some ailments thereby taking surgery off as a medical option. An example of this can be found in the use of herbs to aid delivery of a pregnant woman in labour. Also, the traditional bone setting system is another example where African herbs have recorded much improvement. There is the need for more improvement in African medicine for it to be able to compete with its counterpart, the orthodox medicine. Such improvement is expected in the area of research collaboration and documentation. To this extent, three Nigerian Universities from the South-west region of the country have put all necessary requirements in place to start degree programs in herbal medicine. The universities are University of Medical Sciences, Ondo state, University of Ibadan and Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogun, Edo (Punch, May 29, 2018).

Earlier research involving investigation through interaction with some traditional medicine practitioners in African Medicine

especially in Yorubaland, showed African medicine are sub-divided into three areas of specialization viz: Diviners (The Babalawo), mid-wives (Agbebi or IyaAbiye), and herbalists (Onisegun)(Onuh, 2018). Each of the above-mentioned practitioners specializes in different aspects of health. Diviners are responsible for determining the cause of illness, which in some cases, are believed to stem from ancestral spirits and other influences through consultation of oracle (Ifa). The Diviners consult the oracle to know specifically the cause of the illness and what can be done to heal the patients. In some cases, all that will be needed is a sacrifice to appease the gods or Witches and Wizards. In other cases, the use of herbs or other concoctions will be required. Traditional midwives make extensive use of indigenous herbs and roots to aid childbirth from the ante-natal stage to the post-natal stage. The life and good health of the baby are so important to them that, they do everything possible to protect both the mother and child. Herbalists are known in Africa for using herbs and roots to cure diseases, sicknesses and illnesses such as malaria, fever, psychiatric disorders, high blood pressure, cholera, infertility, epilepsy, asthma, urinary tract infections, Pile, impotency in man among others. Surgery is a rare phenomenon in Africa medicine except for some minor ones that does not involve human dissecting. This paper attempts a critical look into the effectiveness of African Medicine in creating a healthier African community, the benefits and how it can be improved upon to be effectively competitive with the orthodox medicine.

What is African Medicine?

African medicine was defined by Helwig, (2005) as a holistic area of knowledge that involves the extensive use of indigenous herbalism combined with aspects of African spirituality. According to the

World Health Organization (WHO), “Traditional medicine is the sum total of knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures that are used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve, or treat physical and mental illnesses” (WHO, 2008).

Just like other bodies of knowledge, the knowledge of African medicine is transferred orally from fathers to their children or from masters to their apprentice. The practice of herbal medicine for care and cure of diseases has been in existence before the coming of the Europeans who condemned the African Medicine by calling it witchcraft and magic, and declared it illegal, but replace it with orthodox medicine which is not as effective in treating ailments as African medicine (Abdullahi, 2011, p117). African medicines deal with the administration of herbs and concoctions by an African healer or medicine man popularly known as an herbalist (Onisegun), while witchcraft is defined by (Russell and Lewis, 2022), as the work of ugly old women who meet secretly at night, indulging in cannibalism, sacrifices to the Devil, or Satan, and performing evil or black magic. Though, in Russell Burton and Lewis Iona's opinion, to the contemporary generation of people, witchcraft only exists in the imagination and not in any objective reality (Russell and Lewis, 2022). Healing of any illness does not in any way concern the witches but some diviners after consulting the oracle appease them if they were seen to be the one behind the patient sickness.

The continuous use or existence of African medicine in the continent up till now after it has been condemned is due to its efficacy. The inability of majority of Africans to afford orthodox and modern healthcare facilities is a major reason for to reconsider herbal

medicine. For instance, in Nigeria, the population is said to be about 200 million, and only about 20 percent or less have access to modern healthcare facilities either through public or private healthcare facilities since more than half of the population live in rural areas where there are not facilities (Abah, 2022). The remaining 80 percent of people have no other readily available means of taking care of themselves other than African medicines otherwise referred to as Herbal Medicine. Apart from these reasons given above, one other factor responsible for the continuous existence of African medicine despite the level of our civilization and exposure is the maternity cases in women. No matter the level of education and exposure, Africans still believe so much in the use of African medicine to aid the safe delivery of pregnant women.

Researches from many African regions show that up to 87 percent of women are still using some forms of traditional and complementary therapies with more conservative estimates ranging between 20 and 60 percent (Frawley et al, 2017, p52). Not only that, African women also use African medicine for the treatment of pre-menstrual tension, pregnancy related problems, back pain, infertility, post-menopausal symptoms, and for induction of labour (Shewamene, 2017). For instance, it is a general belief among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria that taking of jute leave soup (Ewedu) helps a woman in labour. When it comes to pregnancy, Africans are always very careful and they forbid any situation that will lead to Cesarean Section (CS), hence they use all they know in African medicine to make sure their women have safe delivery and maintain good health of the mother and child during the postnatal period.

What this means is that regardless of several efforts at degrading

traditional African medicine as the practice of witchcraft and magic by the Westerners as people were told in the churches and mosques this ancient system of healing still continues to thrive in Africa. According to Saltan, Nasir and Sajjad (2106), the side effects of orthodox drugs is a major reason people still prefer Herbal medicine. Practitioners of African Medicine can be found in every part of the continent. Despite being Christians and Muslims, some religious clerics adopt this means of healing to help whoever comes to them. Although, it is believed that African medicine, as practiced in Africa is generally not adequately researched, weakly regulated and lacks detailed documentation for its process and use, the practitioners of African medicine have now collaborated with higher institutions of learning in Nigeria to introduced African medicine as part of their curriculum. These universities will complement the effort of the local medicine practitioners in carrying out research and documentation of their findings. Not only that, the Federal Government of Nigeria has established the Nigeria Natural Medicine Development Agency (NNMDA) to study, collate, document, develop, preserve and promote Nigerian traditional medicine products and practices to also fast-track the integration of the African Medicine into the mainstream of modern health care system in line with happenings in China and India (Abdullahi, 2011, p116).

In African Medicine, just like it is everywhere else, diseases, sickness, and illness slightly differ but are related. People who do not really know the difference use the words interchangeably. For clarification purpose, Disease is known to be a disorder of structure or function in a human, animal, or plant, especially one that produces specific symptoms or that affects a specific location and is not

simply a direct result of physical injury (Bindenagel, 2017, p2). It is a condition that is diagnosed by a physician or other medical expert, which includes a specific diagnosis according to standardized and systematic diagnostic codes. (Anders *et al*, 2005, p452). Illness on the other hand is defined as the ill health identified in a patient, which often based on self-reported mental or physical symptoms (Anders *et al*, 2005, p452). In some cases, this may mean only minor or temporary problems, but in other cases self-reported illness might include severe health problems or acute suffering. It may include health conditions that limit the person's ability to live a normal life. Sickness is the last on the list, and it relates to different phenomenon, such as the social role a person with illness or diseases like mental disability takes or is given in society, in different fields of life.

The Pragmatic Efficacy of African Medicine

It is a good thing to know that the African Medicine has gained more acceptance recently than it was two decades ago after several decades of blackmail, condemnation and rejection (Motamarri, 2021). Such acceptance only comes as a result of the benefits people are getting from it. During an interview with Dr. Buniyameen Banire of Banire Trado-medical Centre and Competent Group of Divine Therapy on the 7th of February, 2020, some benefits of African medicine was mention which confirm the arguments of Sultan, Nasir and Sajjad (2016) on homeopathy. Several African medicine practitioners such as Yem kem International, Oko-oloyun Worldwide, Dr Banire Trado-medical etc., have modernized their ways of producing and administering their herbal products. There are now herbal medicines in capsules and tablets and there are always ingredients and dosage labels in most of them. Some examples of repackaged are FIJK flusher for treatment of STD and

Wiper for treatment of glaucoma by Oko-oloyun, Yoyo bitters for detoxifying the body system by Abblat herbal products ltd, Eroxil energy herbal mixture and Rio-tonic blood purifier, YK 2000 for mild infection and Super bitter by Yemkem International Alternative Therapy. All these herbs were packed in bottles as syrup and capsule for easy consumption with dosage inscribed on the packets. Before now these herbs will only be cooked with a clay pot and whoever that wants to use them will have to take it home with the clay pot and have to warn it on daily basis.

But the question is does this mean that herbal medicine can now compete with the orthodox medicine? This answer to this question is no. The production and processing of herbal medicine in most cases are still with the use of crude implements and the problem of research is a major setback. African Herbal medical practitioners still need to get equipment and machineries to process their herbs. The way herbal medicine is processed and preserved to increase its shelf life in Africa possibly will make it lose some of its efficacies. Also, there is need for African herbal medicine practitioners to intensify their research on a better way to preserve herbs like their counterparts in China, India and other Countries of the world that produce herbal medicine as an alternative to the orthodox medicine.

Several people who have taken one herbal medicine or the other have confirmed that the medicine no doubt is effective. Many Africans still take herbs to cure disease and illness even after taking orthodox medicine, this is as a result of their belief that, the orthodox medicine only treats illness or diseases temporarily but, herbs will provide a permanent cure (Homeopathic treatment). This and many more are the reason; the World Health Organization now plays a greater role in

making sure African medicine is taking to the next level. Practitioners of African medicine claim to have the capacity to curing a wide range of diseases and illnesses, including cancers, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), psychiatric disorders, high blood pressure, cholera, infertility, eczema, hay fever, anxiety, depression, urinary tract infections, and healing of wounds and burns in an holistic way. According to Ncube, *et al* (2013), South African *sangomas* have been long and vocal advocates of a local traditional plant called *unwele* or *kankerbos* (*Sutherlandiafrutescens*) claiming it assists in the treatment of HIV/AIDS, cancer and tuberculosis. This is possible because African traditional healers find out the root causes of diseases and illness, and allow them to determine the choice of the herbs or other ways to cure the disease or illness. Sometimes, the gods will have to be appeased before treatment commences if they find out the disease or illness is caused as a result of a wrath of the goods (Helwig, 2005). According to Helwig, traditional African healers apart from herbs may also employ charms, incantations, and casting of spells in treating a patient.

African medicine called *pygeum* (*Prunus africana*), was said to be one of the popular African medicine which has been sold in Europe since the 1970s as a treatment for mild-to-moderate benign prostatic hyperplasia. Each year, 2,000 metric tons of *pygeum* barks are harvested in Cameroon and another 600 tons are harvested in Madagascar (Kale, 1995, p1182-5). Kale explained further that in Africa, the bark is made into a tea. Elsewhere in the world, it is sold in powders, tinctures, and pills, often combined with other herbs believed to help with prostate problems. Users report greater ease of urination, with reduced inflammation and cholesterol deposits

(Kale, 1995, p1182-5). Aside *pygeum*, Garlic (*Allium sativum* L.) is another notable African root used in curing illness. Fresh garlic bulb dried and powdered or oil extracted from the bulb are used as anti-bacterial, anti-viral, anti-fungal, anti-hypertensive, blood-glucose-lowering anti-thrombotic, anti-mutagenic and anti-platelet and it is recognized overseas (Ernest *et al*, 2018, p,112). Its best researched clinical effect is that of lowering total serum cholesterol levels, probably through inhibition of hepatic cholesterol synthesis. The recommended dosage is about 4g of fresh garlic daily, equivalent to approximately 8 mg garlic oil or 600– 900 mg garlic powder preparations standardized to 1.3% alliin content (Ernest *et al*, 2018, p113).

However, patient with bleeding abnormalities were advised to stay away from the uncontrolled use of Garlic for treatment of any form of illness or diseases. It is recommended that garlic supplements should be discontinued before major surgery. Adverse effects of garlic are usually mild and transient; they include breath and body odour, allergic reactions, nausea, heartburn, flatulence (Ernest *et al*, 2018, p113).

The effectiveness of African Medicine otherwise called Herbal medicine can be seen from the rate at which it is being used in Nigeria and some other Africa countries. The fact is that developed countries with highly sophisticated orthodox medical facilities also make them accessible to almost every citizen in curing illness such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, skin conditions etc. According to the report made by European Herbal and Traditional Medicine Practitioners Association (EHTPA), in 2009, around a third of all deaths in the UK were caused by cardiovascular diseases, including

82,000 deaths caused by coronary heart disease and 49,000 by stroke, between 2 and 46% of respondents made use of herbal remedies (Kiat and Chang, 2012). A more recent US survey confirmed that the usage of herbal medicines by the general US population, for instance, increased by 380% (from a 1-year prevalence of 2.5–12.1%) between 1990 and 1997 and that 16.4% of all patients attending an internal medicine clinic were current users of herbal medicines (Eisenberg *et al*, 1998, p1572). According to these and other survey data, medical herbalism was most commonly employed for allergies, insomnia, respiratory, and digestive problems.

Conclusion

Traditional African medicine is the indigenous way of healing practiced all over the continent of Africa and it employs the homeopathic system of treatment. The homeopathic system of treatment as explained earlier is a holistic way of treating disease and illnesses and is better than the allopathic system of treatment that treats only signs and symptoms of diseases and illnesses. The origin of African medicine was based on the accumulated experimental experience of African forefathers. Though, its mode of transmission which is by word-of-mouth (Oral transmission) can be said to be one of those things that hindered its acceptance and development. Other things are the issue of secrecy, dosage, application, and packaging. Irrespective of its shortcomings, African medicine has played a significant role in the lives of Africans by making cures and treatments available to the majority of the people of Africa especially those in rural areas or those that cannot afford orthodox medicine. Also, it has been of great help in terms of treating long-term illness and disease which is adequately effective

with the application of spiritual forces where there is a need for that.

Not only that the African medicines are frequently used in the treatment of long-term conditions which are inadequately managed by orthodox medicine, their effectiveness in the treatment of illness as explained above cannot be overemphasized. And it must be mentioned here that the use of many herbs and roots in treating a single ailment termed poly-pharmacy, is basically to enhance the effectiveness and minimize any potential side effects of treatment.

On this note, it is expected that African governments should establish necessary institutions to support and promote the use of herbal medicine in primary health care delivery. Priority should be given to the development of herbal medicine by means of the following measure inventorying and documenting the various medicinal plants and herbs which are used to treat common diseases in each country. Establish local botanical gardens for the preservation of essential medicinal herbal plants in different parts of each country, in order to ensure a sustainable supply of safe, effective, and affordable medicinal herbs. Set up testing laboratories with adequate facilities for the assessment of the efficacy of medicinal herbs, and establish dosage norms for the most efficacious use of herbal extracts, whether in tablet, capsule, powder, syrup, liquid, or other forms.

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