

AFRICAN TRADO-MEDICINE AND ECO-SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

The African continent is naturally endowed with various plant species and herbs with nutritional and medicinal benefits. This natural endowment as a result has contributed to her rich culture and practice of eco-spirituality. These species of plants and herbs are mostly used in Africa and often taken as food and medicine due to its availability, naturalness and cost effectiveness. Extensive research studies have been conducted on the medicinal uses of most African plants. However, the therapeutic potentials of some of these plants have remained unexploited. Over the years, several studies have revealed that some of these African floras and faunas are imbued with promising potentials for the development of novel drugs if the Africans revive the practice of eco-spirituality. Using the method of critical analysis, the researcher discovers that safety in the use of folk medicines has been a major public health concern over the years and suggests that relevant authorities should take measures in safeguarding the populace on the use of herbal mixtures through good policy formulations and implementation.

Keywords: African traditional medicine, Africa, African, environment, Eco-spirituality

Introduction

The African continent is magnificently endowed with different plant diversity and herbs, mainly due of the prevailing climatic conditions and this advantage has supported the richness of secondary metabolites in the plants for surviving under harsh environmental conditions. According to a report by the WHO (2005) about 80% of the people in developing countries rely on traditional herbal mixtures to treat different diseases. Most villages in Africa still depend solely on traditional herbal mixtures as a source of health treatments because of their beliefs and culturally acceptable indigenous knowledge, accessibility, and affordability. Many herbal mixtures are indubitably expedient for maintaining good health or treating diverse diseases. Africa is recorded as one of the continent with the highest use of traditional medicines.

Furthermore, traditional medicine (TM), variously known as ethno-medicine, folk medicine, native healing, or complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), is the oldest form of health care system that has stood the test of time. It is an ancient and culture-bound method of healing that humans Africans use to cope and deal with various diseases that have threatened their existence and survival. Hence, the most acceptable definitions of TM has been provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO). According to the World Health Organisation (2005) TM is “the sum total of the knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health, as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illnesses” (WHO, 2000). Herbal medicine on the other hand is naturally occurring, plant-derived substances that are used to treat illnesses within local or regional healing practices.

Today, plants are being used to treat a number of health concerns and conditions, including allergies, arthritis, migraines, fatigue, skin infections, wounds, burns, gastrointestinal issues and even cancer proving that it’s true that food is medicine. These herbs are less expensive and safer means of treatment than conventional medications, which is why so many people are choosing to go back to this traditional method of medicine (Tembo 2016).

Since ancient times, African traditional herbal medicine has been used by many different cultures throughout the world for many treatments like malaria, warts, bowel disorders, heart conditions and chronic pain, come from pharmacists and doctors learning about folk knowledge. About 25 percent of the drugs prescribed worldwide are derived from plants? Of the 252 drugs in the World Health Organization’s essential medicine list, 11 percent are exclusively of plant origin. In fact, about 200 years ago the first pharmacological compound, morphine, was produced from opium extracted from the seed pods of the poppy flower. Since then, scientists have been studying plants to create the pharmaceutical products we know today. But after years of overmedicating, facing resistant bacteria in the micro-biome and treating the illness rather than the root of the problem, people are beginning to pay more attention to natural, herbal medicine. These herbal medicine, contributes a lot to maintaining the physical health of individual and with the turn from pharmaceutical products to natural medicine, more attention is now being paid to the ecosystem and the concept of Eco-spirituality. As this would be the only sustainable way to conserve medicinal plants.

African Traditional Medicine

African Traditional Medicine is a complex mixture of organic chemicals that may come from any raw or processed part of a plant. Herbal medicine has its roots in every culture around the world. Traditional medicine has been used for centuries to improve well-being and it continues to play a central role in health care. It draws on the continent's rich and unique biodiversity of aromatic and medicinal plants. It is also a promising industry that African countries can do more to export internationally. Traditional African medicine is a range of traditional medicine disciplines involving indigenous herbalism and African spirituality, typically including diviners, midwives, and herbalists (Kanu 2015, 2013).

Practitioners of traditional African medicine claim to be able to cure a variety of diverse conditions including cancer, psychiatric disorders, high blood pressure, cholera, most venereal diseases, epilepsy, asthma, eczema, fever, anxiety, depression, benign prostatic hyperplasia, urinary tract infections, gout, and healing of wounds and burns and even Ebola. In the 21st century, modern pharmaceuticals and medical procedures remain inaccessible to large numbers of African people due to their relatively high cost and concentration of health facilities in urban centers. Herbal medicines in Africa are generally not adequately researched, and are weakly regulated. There is a lack of the detailed documentation of the traditional knowledge, which is generally transferred orally. Serious adverse effects can result from mis-identification or misuse of healing plants.

History of Traditional Medicine

Early medical traditions include those of Babylon, China, Egypt and India. The Greeks introduced the concepts of medical diagnosis, prognosis, and advanced medical ethics. The Hippocratic Oath was written in ancient Greece in the 5th century BCE, and is a direct inspiration for oaths of office that physicians swear upon entry into the profession today. In the medieval age, surgical practices inherited from the ancient masters were improved and then systematized in Rogerius's *The Practice of Surgery*. Universities began systematic training of physicians around the year 1220 in Italy. During the Renaissance, understanding of anatomy improved, and the microscope was invented. The germ theory of disease in the 19th century led to cures for many infectious diseases. (Lai, Roy 2004).

Military doctors advanced the methods of trauma treatment and surgery. Public health measures were developed especially in the 19th century as the rapid growth of cities required systematic sanitary measures. Advanced research centers opened in the early 20th century, often connected with major hospitals. The mid-20th century was characterized by new biological treatments, such as antibiotics. These advancements, along with developments in chemistry, genetics, and radiography led to modern medicine. Medicine was heavily professionalized in the 20th century, and new careers opened to women as nurses (from the 1870s) and as physicians (especially after 1970).

The pharmacological treatment of disease began long ago with the use of herbs (Chavunduka). Methods of folk healing throughout the world commonly used herbs as part of their tradition. Some of these traditions are briefly described below, providing some examples of the array of important healing practices around the world that used herbs for this purpose. One of the most important advantages of these supplements is that they come from various natural sources. As these supplements come from various foods, the body has a better chance of balancing them out in the system. The body in turn absorbs all the essential nutrients and has no side effects like the chemical medicines. Every artificial element or supplement found in the regular chemicals do not make the body better and very often make the body go through a lot more pain that it already has. People are often worried about the side effects most medications have and have in turn done a lot of research before swallowing anything. Most medications come in all kinds of colors which can be harmful to the body.

Most vitamins and supplements are filled with all kinds of binders and fillers that are synthetic. A lot of the vitamins and supplements based foods are little more expensive but are better in quality and far more superior. Herbal vitamins and herbal nutritional supplements are eaten and bought all over the globe in large amounts and quantities. The natural supplements are used over the years by various cultures and societies all across the world from China to Africa. In the recent years, herbs have gained a lot more importance and a lot more perspective and have begun to flourish all over the world. The body needs its nutrients and herbs that are always received from all the liquids and the food we eat. There great range of the lists of African-trado medicine as: Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), Curcumin, Ginger,

Appreciation of Eco-spirituality

The concept of Eco-spirituality is a vital one which is meant to be critically looked into by every spiritual, social, and activist movement all over the world. Eco-spirituality is a practical term that is based on the belief of the sacredness of the environment, it sees humans as one with the environment and tries to reorient the idea of human seeing themselves as superior to the environment, such orientation has brought more harm than good to the physical ecosystem. The view of the world as sacred has been a culture upheld by the African since time immemorial in fact, the ancient African man worshiped the earth and its inhabitant (this though, isn't encouraged) and this has set them well above other continents in natural richness.

With development in the different aspects of the environment the idea of eco-spirituality is gradually being forgotten. The practices of humans and their over bearing acts on the environment is quite alarming. The fact that man has failed to consider the environment as a sacred entity which needs to be upheld and respected above all other ambition is born out of greed and the need to meet up with trends. Eco-spirituality understands the position of human being to be inextricably related to all other life form. The activity of one form directly or indirectly affects the other forms. Scientists say; science is the mother of all invention, which is true, but we should remember that nature is the mother of all things even the Bible stated that man was made of sand and to sand shall man go back to after death. Such spiritual truth create a real and critical religious imperative that encourage believers to develop congruity through act of spiritual love and care for all conscious beings now and for future reference.

The idea of eco-spirituality evolution should be embraced with both hands the true relationship of man and its environment should always be born in mind even as we actively try to meet up with trends. The pollution and over exploitation of our eco-system would one day bring us to doom, medically, spiritually physically and other wise, if nothing tangible is done today to avert it. The beautiful nature and the universe, would be but a memory represented on pictures and paintings and this, of course would be an express death to traditional medicine

Practice of African Trado-medicine and Environment

In African traditional medicine, the curative, training, promoting, and rehabilitative services are referred to as clinical practices. Clinical practice can also be viewed as the process of evaluating conditions of ill-health of an individual and its management. These traditional health care services are provided through tradition and culture prescribed under a particular philosophy, in which the norms and taboos therein are strictly adhered to and form the basis for the acceptability of traditional health practitioners in the community they serve (Mahomoodally 2013).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Bodeker 2004) and views health as one of the fundamental rights of every human being. The combination of physical, mental/emotional, and social well-being is commonly referred to as the health triangle. The recognition of disease and illnesses in traditional Africa meant that every society needed to devise means of containing its problem. Worldwide, different societies have different herbal traditions that have evolved over a long period of time. Similar to modern day Western treatment patterns, African traditional societies also involved herbalism, surgery, dietary therapy, and psychotherapy, in addition to traditional exorcism, rituals, and sacrifice (Mhame, Busia, Kasilo 2010).

These medical technologies had evolved even before the coming of the “white man” (Arabs and Europeans). Successful treatments became formalized, sometimes with prescriptions of correct methods of preparation and dosage. In addition, the ingredients and the manner of preparation varied with the ailment but were also dependent on various factors such as geographical, sociological, and economic, but the significant point was that in many cases, patients were cured of their physical or psychological ailments.

Classification of Traditional Herbal Medicine according to the Usage

According to Mbele, Hull and Dlamini (2006) The herbs are classified in four parts: Medicinal herbs, Culinary herbs, Aromatic herbs and Ornamental herbs.

- Medicinal Herbs have curative powers and are used in making medicines because of their healing properties like marigold, lemon balm, lavender, johnny-jump-up, feverfew etc.

- Culinary Herbs are probably the mostly used as cooking herbs because of their strong flavours like oregano, parsley, sweet basil, horseradish, thyme etc.
- Aromatic Herbs have some common uses because of their pleasant smelling flowers or foliage. Oils from aromatic herbs can be used to produce perfumes, toilet water, and various scents. For e.g. mint, rosemary, basil etc.
- Ornamental Herbs are used for decoration because they have brightly coloured flowers and foliage like lavender, chives, bee balm, lemongrass etc (Okafor and Ham 1999).

Relevance of Traditional Medicine on African Society

Using medicinal herbs can sometimes be better than using medical drugs. Here are some reasons why medicinal herbs are better.

- Consuming herbs may help to prevent and manage heart disease, cancer and diabetes. It may also help to reduce blood clots and provide anti-inflammatory and anti-tumor properties. Research is ongoing but studies have shown that: Garlic, linseed, fenugreek and lemongrass may help lower cholesterol.
- They cost less: The rising cost of prescription drugs have led the people to look for alternatives. While medicinal herbs may not be as strong or as fast acting as conventional medicine, there is a growing body of scientific evidence that shows their efficacy and in what doses.
- They may have fewer side effects: While the side effects of any herbal medication depend on the drug in question, many have fewer side effects than conventional medicine. For example, St. John's Wort, which is used for mild to moderate depression, has fewer side effects than most other prescriptive antidepressants.
- There is a choice on how to use them: Medicinal herbs can be used in a variety of ways, depending on the kind of herb that is to be used. Some herbs can be mixed with food. Some can be made into tea, and there are some that are available in capsule or tablet form.
- They are good for more than one condition: Most prescriptive drugs are designed for one specific health problem. By contrast, many herbal medicines act on several parts of the body at once. For example Ginko (Ginko biloba) is good for circulatory disorders, but it also helps enhance memory.

Adverse Effects of Trado-Medicine

In African communities, the introduction of herbal mixtures to the market is a norm even without scientific evaluation to ascertain their safety. There is also a belief that herbal products are safe. Besides, traditional healers lack regulatory control to guide their products, all these factors have worked together to misinform millions of people, resulting in the death of people (Kayombo and Mahunnah 2013).

Apart from microbial contamination, heavy metals have been reported to be contributors to the toxicity of herbal products that have led to life-threatening situations or death (Oshikoya, Njokunma, Chukwura, Ojo 2007). Several plants contain toxic bioactive compounds that can disturb, numerous African rural dwellers believe that since their ancestors used herbal mixtures/concoctions for their wellbeing in the past and with no side effect, they habitually assume that because the herbal mixtures are natural, therefore their safety is guaranteed. Unfortunately, this assumption has led to several damages and death of the users (Omonzejele 2008).

In addition, traditional healers are very secretive about their indigenous practices handed down from their ancestors to the new generation and this makes their treatment prescriptions vague, often resulting in overdoses of the mixtures by their patients since no regulatory body controls the usage of herbal medicines. Sadly, some people ignorantly combine herbal mixtures with orthodox medicines without a doctor's prescription and perhaps, not considering their adverse interactions. It is important to note that uncontrolled consumption of herbal mixtures could lead to liver damage, kidney failure and stomach upsets, diarrhea, etc. Therefore, knowledge is key in preventing overdoses or abuse (Parmer 2005).

Factors Influencing the Use of African Traditional Herbal Medicines

Over the years, the patronage of people towards herbal medicine has been increasing tremendously because of several reasons: According to Hemphill, Cobiac et al (2006) he stated the following:

The belief of rural dwellers and their indigenous cultures: Numerous rural dwellers have strong convictions that their beliefs and cultural practices for treating diseases are far better than modern medicine. Some even have a strong phobia towards orthodox medicines. As a result, nothing can make them opt for

orthodox medicine even if the government is willing to pay their medical bills. They prefer consulting their gods and searching for a practical solution by sacrificing animals to please their gods. Different African traditional healers have their unique ways of consulting their oracles and communicating their findings to clients on their health-related issues and the possible solutions. In addition, these patients are more comfortable in expressing their health problems to the traditional healers in their local dialects than to a professional medical doctor (Adusi-Poku 2010).

A perception that herbal medicines are natural and safe: Most herbal medicine users believe that herbal medicines are safe because they are products of plant naturally found in the environment and thus, they assume that being natural implies safety with no adverse effect compared to those reported from the use of orthodox medicine. Accessibility and cost-effectiveness: Herbal medicines have been the only option source of treatment in some African communities because they are cheap and the raw materials for preparing the mixtures are easily available. Besides, their cost- effectiveness cannot be compared with orthodox medicines, as most people living in these areas are poor and unable to afford the cost of modern treatments. These salient reasons have mitigated the rural dwellers towards the use of herbal medicines.

Superior efficacy of herbal medicines: Many people believe that herbal medicines are more potent than orthodox medicines and the failure of orthodox medicines to treat some complicated health problems has diverted people's attention in seeking herbal mixtures as an alternative source. Herbal mixtures contain several bioactive compounds that are believed to work together in synergy and thus enhancing their potency over orthodox medicines to treat some complicated health problems has diverted people's attention in seeking herbal mixtures as an alternative source. Herbal mixtures contain several bioactive. Confidentiality of health problem information: Most people are not comfortable when information regarding their health problem is revealed to many people other than their doctor. All patients have files containing their health information and the medical record clerks are responsible for handling these files. However, local people who use herbal medicines feel safer and prefer to discuss their health problem with the traditional healers to a modern health system where their files will be handle by different people on duty.

Self medications: This habit is common among the people living in the rural and semi-urban communities in African countries since the plant materials are easily accessible coupled with the little knowledge they acquired from generation about herbal concoctions, they tend to prescribe herbs preparations for people around them with similar kind of illnesses. The assumption is that since the concoctions have worked for other people, they would also serve the same purpose for any sick person with related symptoms.

Fear of erroneous diagnosis: Most people prefer to opt for traditional medicines because of the fear of the wrong diagnosis from the modern health system. There are several reasons why a patient can be wrongly diagnosed in the hospital and such factors include unskilled medical operators (lack of advanced training of medical operators on the usage of new medical equipment), failure of old medical equipment, over the labour of medical staff, underpayment of medical staff, the inexperience of medical staff, mismanagement of patient's file, inconsistency/changing of the medical doctor in charge of a patient. Long waiting period and queue involved to see a medical doctor: The queue involved, and time spent in seeing a medical doctor at the hospital is unbearable for most people in Africa, most especially, people without medical aid that patronize the government hospitals. Most hospitals in Africa are understaffed, so the population of patients overwhelms the capacity of these hospitals, and consequently, patients often seek an immediate alternative to solve their health problems. In some cases, sick people in the village might need urgent attention, with no ambulance available in the villages to convey them to the modern hospital in the town or city.

In addition, a bad road network in the villages has been a huge challenge for the rural dwellers to get proper medical treatment. Besides, even the so-called mobile clinics are always frustrated or unwilling to go to the villages to attend to the poor people because of the poor road network, consequently, the villagers tend to opt for the most available alternative treatment (White 2015). Advertisement of herbal products: Over the years, the market strategies of herbal mixtures or products in different ways have captured people's attention in testing the efficacy of these products. Some traditional healers go on the street advertising their products by sharing handbills, pasting their posters everywhere in the town, or even employing marketing agents that will help them display their products on the television, different social media platforms. Marketing promotes business because of the awareness it creates for people and the

visibility of a product is usually enhanced with an advertisement (Kofi-Tsekpo 2004).

Limitations of African Traditional Medicine

There are, however, still disadvantages to the practice of trado-medicine which borders more on the functional diagnosis and proper medication. Others are effective treatment, it's inaccessibility to people living in urban areas, high abuse possibilities, lack of regulation and dosage instructions but as herbal medicine becomes more popular, it is becoming easier to find trained professionals and even naturopathic doctors who can advise on the safest and most effective ways to use herbal medication.

Beyond these as well as training of personnel especially when most people believe that Trado-medicine is a kind of gift endowed to someone or a natural inheritance favored one receives from one's lineage. Trado-medicine beyond these are circumscriptive in line with the fact that *nku din a mba na eghere mba nri*. Malaria for example was curable within our environment using plants that have quinine extracts. Our natural environment in this regards provided for itself and heals itself. This is why many African traditionalists believe that African nature provides for itself. COVID-19 pandemic and its much projection-brouhaha in African with unfathomable mortality rate was completely shattered due to primarily our African trado-medical nature as many African herbs have been proved to efficacious against COVID-19.

African Traditional Medicine and Western Medicine

Medicine is the art, science, and practice of caring for a patient and managing the diagnosis, prognosis, prevention, treatment or palliation of their injury or disease. Medicine encompasses a variety of health care practices evolved to maintain and restore health by the prevention and treatment of illness. According to Angell and Kassier (2007) Western Medicine is "the conventional approach to medicine in western societies, based on the diagnosis and explanation of illness as a malfunction of the body's biological mechanisms." It encompasses a range of health care practices evolved to maintain and restore health by the prevention and treatment of illness (Sofowora 1982).

WHO defines Traditional medicine as "the sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on 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.” Traditional medicine that has been adopted by other populations outside its own culture is often termed alternative or complementary medicine (WHO, 2008).

WHO claimed that primary healers in traditional African medicine are midwives, herbalist and diviners. Diviners are responsible for determining causes of sickness by the ancestral spirits (WHO, 2008). Midwives use herbs and indigenous plants in aiding pregnancy and childbirth (WHO, 2008). Herbalists use animal, plants and mineral based medicines to cure diseases (WHO, 2008). Herb market and herb trading is a very common practice in many African countries (Okpako, 2006)

The use of western and African traditional medicine depends on an individual’s beliefs and culture. It also depends on the availability of funds to seek treatment. In Africa most people cannot afford to source western medicine mainly because it is very expensive and so they resort to their traditional medication mainly because it is cheaper (Oreagba, Oshikoya, Amachree 2007).

Safeguarding Quality and Safety of African Trado-products

Several challenges affect the quality of herbal products, which could result from the following:

Insufficient knowledge or information about the plant species: Most people that practice traditional medicine in Africa do not have good knowledge about the plants used in the treatment of different ailments since they strongly believe in the information passed to them from one generation to another. They do not know the scientific information about the toxicity of one plant to another when used in combination. Besides, the collection or harvest time for medicinal plants is one of the significant factors that affect the potency of the plant for their therapeutic usages and when the traditional healers lack the basic information about the plant, there is a high possibility of misidentification or the use wrong plant species that could result in the toxicity of the herbal mixtures or products (Bury etal. 2011).

Lack of quality control on the herbal products: The preparation of most herbal products in the market or those used by the people in the villages are devoid of quality control assessment and the chances of their toxicity or adverse effect on human are very high, though some have been proven to be promising. There is no regulatory or standard set aside for the preparation of herbal products in the

village in Africa, hence, microbial contamination from the harvesting stage, production, and packaging is common in these products. Hence, the quality of materials used for the preparation of the herbal products determines the level of their safety.

Lack of standard preparation methods: Different communities in Africa have their ways of preparing herbal mixtures and the method used in the preparation influences the extraction of the bioactive compounds in these plants, which are significant to their therapeutic values. Lack of standard methods may indirectly affect the difference in the efficacy of plants from various communities.

Complex nature of the plant extracts: Several researchers have reported that the plant extracts contain many bioactive compounds and the complex nature of the method used in isolating and purifying individual bioactive compounds is critical and such analysis might not be possible in a local setting.

Overdose prescription: The prescription of herbal mixtures/products by traditional healers in the African communities is one of the factors that have resulted in many deaths in this region. Most herbal mixtures contain several bioactive ingredients and adequate knowledge about the pharmacokinetics and the mechanism of actions of these products is lacking, hence, the prescription about the dosage used by the patients is not evidenced-based, which consequently leads to liver or kidney damage. Equally there is lack of scientific proof: Most herbal products in African countries lack any scientific validation. However, this why it's traditional medicine. It's just true to its name as such.

Conclusions

It is unequivocally clear that traditional medicines helps to prevent diseases and minor illness like headaches, stomach aches, fractures, sprains and a lot more. People very often have had herbal massages and herbal baths. It makes them feel better and a lot more relaxed after a tiring day of work and long hours of pressure and strain. Herbal medicines are very cheap in comparison to the conventional form of medication. It's something which every pocket can afford, unlike other forms of medications.

Traditional herbal medicines can be consumed without the aid of any kind of prescription. They can be found very easily from a local drug store. Herbal medicines are known to be more productive in comparison to other forms of medication in curing certain conditions. Unless mixed with other chemical

components, they are known to be all natural (Ayodele 2002). Unfortunately, there are still several gaps that are needed to be addressed, especially concerning the safety of these herbal mixtures or products to public health on the African continent. Therefore, there is every need to introduce African traditional healers and traditional herbal medicines to modern scientific practices.

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