

**CONFLICTING PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN THE
OKU FONDOM, BAMENDA (CAMEROON): THE QUESTION OF
ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT**

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Abstract

Conflicting schools of thought have come up regarding the practice of traditional medicine in Africa. Others argued that the practice was demonic and contradictory to the will of God while others saw the practice as a gift and the blessing of God upon them. It is with this that this paper maintained that the practice of traditional medicine in Oku Fondom was a strong bone of contention between the western institutions and the 88rade-practitioners. In an attempt to address this issue, the paper made appeal to a wide range of primary, mainly, oral sources and complements with some secondary data. The data obtained was analyzed using qualitative and narrative approach. The study revealed that the practice of traditional medicine in Oku was the main point of division between the western, principally Christian-faith based institutions and the 88rade-practitioners. It was also discovered that traditional medicine had been a long established and resilient practice in the Oku Fondom, in spite threats from western medical advocacy and facilities.

Keywords: Conflicting, Perception, Traditional, Medicine, Oku, Bamenda, Grassfields, Cameroon.

Introduction

Traditional medicine is a facet of a people's culture which focuses on the use of herbs to restore health. This practice was a characteristic of the African society where most communities utilized natural products like leaves, bark of trees, roots of trees as well as certain animal parts for healing. The process was cheap and easy to access than western medicine and for this reason, many people went in for it. The healing process was almost similar in the different African societies given the fact that African societies had interrelated cultural values. In Oku, one of the typical African societies located in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, the practice of traditional medicine was identical to the people. It was practiced in a way that just seeing an Oku man, the first thought was traditional medicine.

Both spiritual and physical traditional healing was practiced in the Fondom whereby the spiritual forces were invited through incantations to come and help in the healing process. With the spiritual practice, most of the healers became deeply involved and believed in African Traditional Region (ATR) than in Christianity. They believed that their world and their activities were influenced first by God almighty, gods, deities and ancestral spirit. This made the Christians and western institutions to see traditional doctors and their practices as devilish. Others who have seen the effectiveness of traditional medicine perceived it as God's way to keep the underprivileged healthy. This then led to the conflict of philosophies on the perception of traditional medicine in Oku Fondom. This paper argues that the implantation of Western institutions in Oku ushered in the atmosphere of conflicting perception of traditional medicine in the Fondom. This paper is divided into two parts; the first part brings out the various views about traditional medicine by the western institutions and the second part examines the views of this practice by the traditional medical practitioners and their faithfuls in Oku.

Conflicting philosophies about traditional medicine

The argument raised here is that the colonization of Cameroon led to the spread of western cultures like Christianity, western medicine and western education all over Cameroon including Oku. These western institutions did not see anything good about the culture of Oku including the practice of traditional medicine. This led to the growth of two factions strongly opposing each other in their observation of traditional medical practice in Oku Fondom.

Institutions such as the church, western health units, western educational institution and their converts regarded traditional medicine with a pejorative mindset. They saw nothing important about traditional medicine and preached strongly against the practice. Each of these institutions had its own way in which it perceived traditional medicine and Oku culture at large. They tried all their efforts to make sure that the culture of Oku including traditional medicine was relegated to the background and made sure that the western cultural norms were promoted. In less than no time, their influence was felt all over Oku as even those who had been faithful to the practice of traditional medicine got converted to embrace the Eurocentric view of the Oku traditional healing. These converts

spread contrary messages to the practice of traditional healing more than the institutions which got them converted.⁵⁵

The Perception of the Church

To the church, there was nothing godly in the practice of traditional medicine. It regarded traditional healing as satanic, metaphysically influenced from the marine world or dark forces. These prerogatives and misconceived perceptions of traditional healing started shortly after the first Baptist church was established in the Fondom around the 1930s.⁵⁶ Around 1930s, the first seed of radical Christianity emerged in Oku with the foundation of Jiane Baptist church under Moses Nkeng. He was the first to conceive the western Christian value in the land of Oku. He was well grounded and directed with the instruction of operating a mission in Oku.⁵⁷ He, and his entourage preached and converted many indigenes to Christ which was appreciated.⁵⁸ In less than no time, Jiane Baptist church started preaching against the cultural practices of Oku including traditional healing. They considered traditional healers as agents of Satan and any of their members who visited a traditional healer was sanctioned from the church.⁵⁹

In the year 2000, the second violent Christian mission that was also against the cultural values of Oku known as the Full Gospel Mission was established in the land. Before then, the Roman Catholic Church was already operating in Oku.⁶⁰ The Catholic Church did not have anything negative about the practice of traditional medicine in Oku. Rather, one of the Rev. Fathers who was equally an Anthropologist Herman Gufler was initiated into the Oku tradition to the extent that he held titles in *Mfu* and *Manjong* houses and was appointed into the Kwifon society by the traditional authorities of Oku.⁶¹ The traditional healers and the Catholics in Oku lived harmoniously contrary to the Baptist and Full Gospel views of traditional medical practices in Oku.⁶²

⁵⁵ Interview with Tata Ngoran, 52, Traditional doctor, Bow-Oku, 21st February 2020.

⁵⁶ Interview with Tankwa George, 42, Teacher, Mbam- Oku, 18th March 2020.

⁵⁷ Interview with Ndishiangong John, 84, Traditional doctor, Jikijem- Oku, 12th October 2019.

⁵⁸ Interview with David Nchinda, 71, Traditional doctor, Elak-Oku, 17th November 2019.

⁵⁹ interview with George Nkwain, 78, Traditional doctor, Mam-Oku, 25th November 2019.

⁶⁰ Interview with Fai Balebay, 84, Notable, Third in Command after the Fon in Oku, Elak-Oku, 24th November 2019.

⁶¹ Mfu and Manjong were the military units in the land of Oku. In times of war, these units were charged with the task of organizing young to fight in the protection of the land. While Kwifon was a regulatory society in the land Oku. It was charged with the task of judging and sanctioning the defaulters of the norms in Oku.

⁶² Interview with Godlove Fenge, 51, Traditional doctor, Bow-Oku, 26th November 2019.

The Full Gospel missionaries organized programs over the Oku Community Radio (OCR) titled “The Revivals” with the aim of curbing the spread of traditional medical practices in Oku.⁶³ They made the inhabitants of Oku to know that the practice of traditional medicine was against the will of God.⁶⁴ They held that traditional healers invited spirits by calling upon the gods, deities and ancestral forces in their healing operation which was unscriptural. These messages preached over the Oku Community Radio went viral not only in Oku but to the neighboring villages. This made people to associate traditional healing in Oku with witchcraft and with this, just hearing Oku in any part of Cameroon, the first thought was traditional medicine. Thus, the advent of Christianity in Oku, especially the Baptist and the Full Gospel perceived traditional medicine as ungodly practice influenced by marine forces. They associated everything in relation to Christian values with short sightedness in understanding that before the advent of Christianity, the people of Oku were believers.⁶⁵ They practiced ATR (African Traditional Religion) which strongly held God as ultimate and creator of mankind.

The views of Western Medical Institutions

The western expression about traditional medicine in Oku was noticed in 1913 when the Society of Jesuit opened the first western health unit in the Nso Kingdom precisely at Shisong. The effect of this health unit was felt throughout the region including Oku as part of Nso Kingdom. Their arrival ushered in another conflict about traditional medicine as they saw it as unhygienic, archaic and primitive. They went around preaching against the practice in the pretext that the herbalists were not having equipments which could be used in the scientific laboratory screening of diseases. To them, the traditional medical practitioners in Oku were based on the trial and error method of treatment which was dangerous to the patients.⁶⁶ This made some of the indigenes to be skeptical about traditional medical healing in the land. The messages of the archaic and unhygienic nature of the traditional medicine was widened in the 1960s and 1980s, with the creation of the Elak Health Centre respectively Jikijem Baptist Health Centre. Their views and perceptions about the traditional healing reached

⁶³ Interview with Tendong Stephen, 55, Full Gospel Pastor 2000, 26th November 2019.

⁶⁴ Interview with Wirkar Sonjom, 61, Traditional doctor, Lui-Oku, 29th November 2019.

⁶⁵ Idem

⁶⁶ Joan Wirba, “ Interaction between Traditional and Western Medicine in Nso Land 1820-2000”, (DEPES II Dissertation in History, University of Yaounde, 2011), 53.

almost every angle of Oku.⁶⁷ These derogatory and misguided views of traditional medicine by the western health institutions corrupted the minds of people who had been faithful to the practice of traditional healing thereby making them to embrace the western culture of healing.⁶⁸ This led to the elbowing of indigenous cultural methods of healing by the western culture thereby provoking resistances from the faithful and devoted practitioners of traditional healing Oku.

Gebremichael puts it generally that modern health professionals consider traditional medical practices as a practice that serves no purpose and several times it has been stated that the continuous existence of traditional medicine was merely because of lack of access to modern health facilities.⁶⁹

Western Education

One of the domains through which traditional medicine was viewed as inferior was in the various western schools. The type of education rendered was the type that perceived Oku culture engulfing traditional medicine as archaic and backward. These educational institutions rendered the western culture of healing superior to the African way of healing.⁷⁰ The western educated ambassadors carried out a derogating mentorship of the inhabitants of Oku to see traditional medicine as nothing than an exploitative and barbaric practice. Noting is the fact that before the advent of western education in Oku, there was a concrete, more precise and specialized educational system where children in families where traditional healing was practiced spend their time under the mentorship of the practitioners. They were educated on the effectiveness and utilization of one medicinal plant to another. This system of education was based on the transfer of healing skills and knowledge to the next of kin.⁷¹ The coming of the Western education did not take all these learnt skills and practice into consideration and as a result no aspect of traditional healing was promoted in the various schools.⁷² With this, after a child could reach secondary school, his interest in the

⁶⁷ Interview with David Nchinda, 71, Traditional doctor, Elak-Oku, 17th November 2019.

⁶⁸ Interview with Shy Suly, 50, Traditional doctor, Ibal-Oku, 19th November 2019.

⁶⁹ Gebremichael Habtom, "Perceptions and Attitudes of Modern and Traditional Medical Practitioners about Traditional Medical Practices in Eritrea," *International Journal of Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 12, no.1 (2010):18-27.

⁷⁰ Klaus G., "WHO Guide lines Challenges in Botswana: Traditional Medicine between Healing, Politics and Witchcraft," *Journal of Political Ecology*, 2, no.5 (2018):27.

⁷¹ Interview with Jeremiah Tanjong, 89, Notable and a traditional doctor, 5th December 2019.

⁷² Idem

traditional practice and culture was already assimilated by the western culture as a result of western education.

The western education as one of the agents of the Western institutions contributed a lot in wiping out the traditional medical practices and Oku culture as a whole.⁷³ It almost made those who had received concrete help from traditional healing to regard traditional medicine as barbaric and archaic.⁷⁴ These perceptions of traditional medicine by western institutions and their ambassadors were bitterly counteracted and backed by the devoted and faithful traditional healers and those who held Oku culture at heart.

The Counter Views of Traditional Practitioners

Most of the traditional healers perceived traditional medicine as a gift from God to Oku Fandom. The indigenous medical practitioners in Oku and their faithful strongly stood against the various views of western institutions on the practice of indigenous healing. They came out to debunk the imagery projected by these institutions especially the interpretation that traditional medicine in Oku was devilish, insanitary and lacked method.

Quoting from Ezekiel 47:12, one of the traditional doctors made it clear that the first medical practice to be approved by God was Traditional Medicine. He said that God commanded the people as seen from this scripture to use herbs for healing and fruits of the tree for food and that this was the bedrock of African traditional medicine.⁷⁵ The indigenous healers in Oku harvested prescribed and well researched herbs, concurred them according to the norms of healing in the land and gave them to their patients.⁷⁶ Worthy of note was the fact that these healing procedures were done for little or no compensation as a fowl and three coins were taken in some instances.

Traditional herbalists went to the OCR to educate the people on the differences between traditional herbalist and witch doctors.⁷⁷ They moved around the Fandom making the indigenous people to realize the harm that Westerners had

⁷³ Interview with Samuel Ngoran, 75, Traditional doctor, Chack-Oku, 28th November 2019.

⁷⁴ Idem

⁷⁵ Interview with Emile Kelei, 42, Mechanics, Bow-Oku, 6th December 2019.

⁷⁶ Interview with George Chongwan, Business Man, Mbam-Oku, 8th December 2019.

⁷⁷ Interview with Tanjong

caused to the culture of Oku.⁷⁸ Thus, they greatly stood against the views of the West with regards to traditional medicine.

Seimboh Moses, one of the healers in Oku made it clear that, in the healing process, God Almighty was first invited upon the herbs with the indulgent that only the spirit of God upon the herbs could enable healing. After the invitation of God almighty, gods of the land and the ancestors were called upon. This was in accordance with the norms of the African religion. He further expressed that dwelling on the view that African traditional practices in Oku were ungodly, was just in accordance with the western believe system which considered the western culture superior to that of the indigenous people of Oku.⁷⁹

Not only did the indigenous population see traditional medicine as cheap, they equally saw it as a means of administering justice in the society.⁸⁰ When your items were stolen, there was no need for yelling, the owner of the stolen property simply went and saw a traditional doctor who upon incantations called the names of gods and ancestors of Oku, killed a fowl on certain property he took to represent the stolen goods and in less than three days, the person who took the goods was inflicted and if he did not show up fast, he died within twenty one days, Ngoran Samuel recounted.⁸¹ This method helped to reduce the rate of robbery in Oku thereby bringing about peace and Order. Also, in some instances, thunder was sent to fetch out the person who was guilty of theft. This was all thanks to the ability of traditional doctors to use herbs in the control of the cosmological forces. Lightning and thunder could easily be controlled to deliver a message to a far-off village.⁸² Thus, this made traditional medicine to be interesting to most of the inhabitants of Oku.

The traditional healers saw and perceived the traditional practices as a virtuous activity especially as from 1992 to 2006. This period marked the reign of Fon Ngum III who was working with the Baptist Fields management in Oku. He struggled to blend Christianity and tradition including traditional medicine. He saw nothing wrong with the practice of traditional medicine in as much as it was for the good of the people and for the purpose of restoring life.⁸³ The Fon held that it was not good to contradict certain healing practices, for their purpose

⁷⁸ Idem

⁷⁹ Interview with Seimboh Moses, 53, Mbam Oku, Notable, 6th January 2020.

⁸⁰ Idem

⁸¹ Interview with Ngoran

⁸² Interview with Seimboh

⁸³ Interview with Balack Philemon, 43, wood Carver, Ngashie- Oku, 4th December 2019.

were to save lives and to make sure everybody was healthy. According to the Fon, no healing method was more than the other as long as the purpose was to bring healing.⁸⁴

To Fon Ngum III, there was no condemnation of traditional medicine in the bible as God even approved herbs for healing in the bible.⁸⁵ He saw traditional metaphysical medicine used in the treatment of spiritual disease as the black man's own method of taking life from the spiritual forces to the physical. He debunked and castigated the pejorative perception of traditional medicine by Christian missionaries and western medical units and made them to understand that it was a practice since the foundation of Oku.⁸⁶ So, the people of Oku could not be separated from their practices in as much as the purpose was genuine. Before his demise in 2006, he had tried to reconcile the traditional norms of Oku with the various Western medical units in the Fondom.⁸⁷ His preaching made traditional medical practitioners and western medical practitioners to co-exist with each other.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the views of the two factions, it can, therefore, be judged that there was no agreements as regard the practice of traditional medicine in Oku. On the one hand, Christian missions mostly the Pentecostal missionaries saw it as satanic, ungodly and contradictory to the Word of God. On the part of the western medical units, they saw it as archaic, barbaric, and unhygienic and a mode through which diseases could be further spread from one patient to another. With this, they struggled to call the practice of traditional medicine off the minds of the inhabitants of Oku. On the other hand, traditional practitioners considered traditional medicine as a gift from God to the under privileged and poor mass. They saw it as cheap and a way through which justice was administered in Oku. In regard of this, we can, therefore, say that the world is endowed with diversity of ecological opportunities to be exploited by the human society. The western culture of healing pertained to an ecological context which might not always be adaptable to the African social niche.

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