

Traditional Medicine in Nigeria

Matthew N. O. Sadiku¹, Uwakwe C. Chukwu², Abayomi Ajayi-Majebi³, Sarhan M. Musa¹

¹Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

²Department of Engineering Technology, South Carolina State University, Orangeburg, SC, USA

³Department of Manufacturing Engineering, Central State University, Wilberforce, OH, USA

ABSTRACT

Health and the provision of healthcare is fundamental to the welfare of any nation.

Traditional medicine is the fundamental method used by humans to preserve health and avoid diseases since ancient times. Traditional medication essentially entails the use of herbal remedies, animal parts, and minerals. Traditional medicine practices can serve as an effective basis for the discovery and development of modern therapeutic drugs. Nigeria's path to greater prosperity lies through investment in the social determinants of the healthcare system. This paper focuses on the traditional medicine in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: *traditional medicine, herbal medicine, Western medicine, Nigeria, Africa*

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INTRODUCTION

Health is one major yardstick often used to determine real growth and development of any nation. It has been well said that “a healthy man is a wealthy man.” Since the dawn of mankind, diseases have been a leading cause of mortality and people have been taking medicines to fight illness or to feel better when they are sick. Humans have used natural products, such as plants, animals, and microorganisms in medicines to alleviate and treat diseases.

Tradition medicine (TM) is called traditional for a reason: it is old fashioned. It refers to the combination of indigenous practices of medicine and several therapeutic experiences of many previous generations for the treatment, control, and management of illnesses. It includes a diversity of health practices, approaches, knowledge, spiritual therapies, manual techniques, and exercises, applied to maintain well-being through treating, diagnosing, or preventing illnesses. It is based on a belief that health is a state of balance between several opposing aspects in the human body. Although modern medicine may exist

side-by-side with TM, herbal medicines have often maintained their popularity for historical and cultural reasons [1,2].

Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa and a key regional player in West Africa. It is home to more than 15 percent of the entire African population, and the median age is about 19 years. It is often regarded as the “Giant of Africa.” It is a culturally diverse federation consisting of 36 autonomous states and the Federal Capital Territory. It is Africa's biggest oil exporter with oil accounting for over 80 percent of exports. As shown in Figure 1, Nigeria is a federal republic divided into 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, where Abuja, country's capital is located [3].

In Nigeria, life expectancy is around 55 and 56 years for males and females respectively. The nation faces a mirage of emerging and reemerging illnesses that are resistance to conventional mode of orthodox treatment. In Nigeria, the use of traditional medicine to treat ailments is a well known fact [4].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Traditional medicine is variously known as ethno-medicine, folk medicine, native healing, complementary medicine or alternative medicine. It is the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures. An understanding of traditional medicine in any community should acknowledge its culture and history. Every region of the world has had one form of traditional medicine at some stage in its history. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 80% of the emerging world's population relies on traditional medicine. For decades, Nigeria has shown interest and appreciation for TM.

In order to understand the underdevelopment of healthcare system in Nigeria, it is essential to examine the historical evolution of healthcare systems. The history of medicine in Nigeria goes back to traditional medicine and its practitioners such as the *wombai* and the *gozan* of the Hausas and Nupein the North, the *adahunse* and *dibia* of the Yoruba and the Ibos in the South. They provided the earliest known care and are still in existence. The real roots of medical care as we know it in Nigeria today are exogenous in origin, traced to the earliest contacts with the culture of the Near East and of the Mediterranean littoral from about 600 BC.

NIGERIAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Since Nigeria consists of various distinct cultural entities including over 250 ethnic groups, there are several traditional medical systems. We will consider the three prominent ones here.

➤ **Yoruba Traditional Medicines:** The Yoruba people developed a form of holistic healthcare system organized into three levels of divination, herbalism, and spiritualism. Divination is basically consulting the spirit world. Herbalism (also Herbal medicine) is the study and the use of medicinal plants, which is the cornerstone of Yoruba traditional medicine. Traditional medicine has always been linked to spiritualism or spirituality. The Yorubas regard illness and disease as something connected to spirits, witches, wizards or ancestors. It is commonly believed that YTM started from a religious text, called *Ifa Corpus*. Ifá divination is often used to diagnose and treat illnesses. The Ifa priest is often called Babalawo, the diviner-priest. One can only become a Babaláwo after years of rigorous training. Exorcism can also be performed by a religious leader or a priest. This is a practice of expelling demons or evil spirits from people who are possessed [5,6].

The Yoruba TM is also known as *oogun* or *oogun ibile*, are usually made from natural substances and include botanical matter, crystals, metal, particular animal skins, claws, and teeth. Yoruba land is home to an extensive and diverse medicinal plant life. Traditional medicines can be used in various ways. Sometimes the preparations of medicine is done by burning the ingredients into powder and then rubbing the powder over the affected part of the body. Some preparations are made by cooking the ingredients as soup. Sometimes pepper soup is used mostly to cure a cold, catarrh, allergies, and a loss of appetite. Traditional chemical products are also used in southwestern Nigeria as traditional adornment especially for wedding and funerals. The medicines are easily available at a street-side pharmacy, almost anywhere in Nigeria [7].

➤ **Igbo Traditional Medicine:** Among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria, TM has a long developmental history from antiquity. It is communicated from generation to generation, through apprenticeship and undocumented, with an organized and structured training system or education. The TM system incorporates plants, animals, mineral-based substances, spiritual therapies, manual techniques, exercises. Its approach includes libations, prayers, divination, dancing, baths, exorcisms, and flogging in the case of mental illness. Like many other traditional medical practices in Africa, Igbo traditional medicine is holistic in understanding health. It treats the patient physically, spiritually, and psychologically. Its continuous practice among the Igbo is based on *Omenala* (tradition). *Omenala* constitutes the factor helping in preserving folk medicine among other practices in Igbo societies despite colonization and missionization influence.

➤ **Igbo folk medicine diagnoses illness in four perspectives:** 1. Ethical – these are caused by general lifestyle and observance of laws and traditions; 2. Bioethical - these are ecologically related, such as vector diseases, water, air pollution, weather change (rainy and dry seasons), cold and heat, micro and macro-organisms; 3. Social disruption - caused by violence, war, and daily living stress; 4. Spiritual these are caused by offenses committed to spiritual beings, deities, false oaths, and ancestors. Diet is another factor. Some staple foods and spices are medicinal [8]. Many Igbo people patronize Bone-Setters over western orthopedic doctors because they are inexpensive, and amputation is rare.

➤ **Hausaand-Fulani Traditional Medicine:** The Hausas and Fulanis are the major tribes of Northern Nigeria, with an organized political, social and cultural life. The Hausa/Fulani traditional medical practitioners across Northern Nigeria claim that their remedies offer the potentials to cure diseases. Several plants have reputed applications and are deliberately used in the treatment of cancer and inflammatory diseases. There is diversity in the type and methods of treatment which depends on the type of disease. Although, the treatment and concept of some diseases are prone to superstitions, ethno-medical information can be used to pursue plants as a source of drugs. There is a need to provide scientific basis for the use of some plants in treating diseases. There has been an existing relationship between Shaman pharmaceuticals and some Nigerian scientific institutions which is aimed at ensuring mutual benefit based on a common purpose consistent with cultural values concerning human health [9]. Traditional medicine practitioners like Malam Salisu, shown in Figure 2, are everywhere in Nigeria, and their livelihoods depend entirely on that business [10].

HERBAL MEDICINE

The use of traditional herbal medicine has a very long historical background that corresponds to the Stone Age. Herbal medicine is the cornerstone of African traditional medicine. It has been an integral part of the African healthcare system since time immemorial. According to the WHO, the goal of “health for all” cannot be achieved without the incorporation of herbal medicines in primary healthcare system. Herbal medicines refer to herbs and finished herbal products that contain plant materials as active ingredients. The plant materials may include seeds, berries, roots, leaves, bark or flowers. In Nigeria, indigenous plants play an important role in treating various diseases. Many drugs used in conventional medicine were originally derived from plants [11]. The practice of traditional medicine is deeply rooted in the culture of many Nigerians.

There are several medicinal plants used for various diseases in Nigeria. Some of the plant parts and derivatives used in Nigeria traditional medicines are listed as follows [12-14]:

- **Bitter Kola:** This belongs to the plant family Guttiferae. In Nigeria, it is called *efiari* in Efik, *cida goro* in Hausa, *ugolo* in Ibo, and *orogbo* in Yoruba.
- **Bitter Leaf:** This belongs to the plant family Compositae. In Nigeria, the Edo calls it *oriwo*; Hausa, *Ibibio atidot*; Igbo, *onugbu*; Tiv, *ityuna*;

and Yoruba, *ewuro*. Bitter leaf protects the liver from drug induced damage. This is illustrated in Figure 3. Bitter leaf is used for treating malaria, typhoid fever, and also diarrhea.

- **Cashew:** This is scientifically known as *Anacardium occidentale*. In Nigeria, it is *jambe* in Hausa; *kachu* in Ibo; and *kantonoyo* in Yoruba.
- **Scent Leaf or Basil:** This belongs to the mint family Lamiaceae. It is called *efirin* in Yoruba, *daido* in Hausa, and *nchanwu* in Igbo. It is used for preventing and treating cold and catarrh, cough, fever, and malaria.
- **Moringa plant (Moringa Oleifera):** This a popular flowering tree. It is referred to as the miracle tree. The uses of Moringa are too many to list, there are culinary, cosmetic, and medicinal uses, etc. Moringa leaves and flowers are rich in polyphenols which helps to protect the liver against oxidation, damage, and toxicity.
- **Ringworm Bush or Candle Plant:** This plant is a popular medicinal plant in the tropics. It is called *ogalu* in Igbo and *asunrun oyinbo* in Yoruba. This plant has antibacterial, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, anti-tumor, analgesic, diuretics, and laxative properties. It is also used in making traditional medicine for treating constipation, diarrhea, intestinal parasites, uterus problems, and also expulsion of filarial worms
- **Mint Leaf Mint:** This is a popular medicinal plant used every place where mint is grown. Mint leaves are used to make tea which is medicinal. They are also used in many product such as toothpaste, room freshener, shampoo, peppermint spray or oil, etc. It also has a lot of culinary uses.
- **Water Leaf:** This is more popular among the Yoruba people in Southwestern part of Nigeria. The Yorubas call it *gbure*, which Edo people call it *ebe-dondon*. The leaves are used in treating people with diarrhea, hepatitis, and liver enlargement.
- **Gakani:** This is a polyherbal drug commonly used in the western parts of Nigeria to treat asthma and related respiratory disorders. It is a mixture of powders from the roots of six plants. One teaspoonful is mixed with pap or soaked in a cup of hot water and taken once daily.

APPLICATIONS OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

For many generations, traditional medicine has been used to prevent and treat many diseases across Nigeria. In rural Nigeria, it is the only form of treatment that exists. Traditional healers are an

important part of the traditional healthcare systems throughout the country. Herbal medicines in Nigeria are used for a variety of health conditions ranging from malaria to child delivery. They are focused on adults with various forms of chronic illnesses, pregnant women, and children with chronic illnesses. Disease conditions identified in traditional medicine include [15]:

1. Cardiovascular disease hypertension, stroke etc. for which the antihypertensive herbs.
2. Diseases of the nervous system-convulsions, insomnia etc. for which the parrot's beak and the African Rauwolfia also offer a good remedy.
3. Diseases of the alimentary system-diarrhoea, dysentery etc. for which basil is useful.
4. Diseases of the endocrine system-diabetes etc. for which the leaves of the common roused periwinkle or mormodica are valuable.
5. Diseases of the respiratory system - asthma, cough etc. for which the lemon grass is of value.
6. Diseases of the genital-urinary system, gonorrhoea, haematuria, etc. for which the bush banana is useful.
7. Diseases of the skin-wounds, dermatomycosis etc. for which the craw-craw plant is very useful.
8. Diseases associated with the ear, nose and throat ache, sinusitis etc. for which the resurrection plant is usually recommended and
9. Diseases caused by microbes, viruses, infections, malaria etc. for which garlic, clove, and the African mahogany have been found useful.

BENEFITS

Herbal medicine is increasingly gaining recognition and attention in Nigeria. Like many developing countries, Nigeria suffers from severe shortage of Western-trained health personnel. The only means of healthcare available to most of rural areas are the traditional healers. Thus, the traditional healers contribute a lot to the battle against diseases and maintenance of health and well-being. Other benefits of TM in Nigeria include:

- **Alternative Treatment:** Since modern medicine cannot cure all diseases, traditional medicine can intervene in the areas where modern medicine is weak or does not exist. It provides an alternative for the majority of Africans who cannot afford modern medical care. It provides solutions to some ailments (such as malaria, epilepsy, madness, and/or HIV/AIDS) that lack effective modern medical treatment. This have made the

practice to be very lucrative. Many Nigerian prefer TM due to lack of trust on western medicine.

- **Affordability:** Use of traditional medicine is often attributed to its relative ease of access and affordability when compared Western medicine. Affordability may not be the major factor in individual's decision to use TM.
- **Popularity:** Traditional medicines are getting significant attention in global healthcare community. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), herbal medicine has become a popular form of healthcare as natural medicinal products are gaining, increasing popularity and use worldwide as complementary alternative therapies.
- **Holistic Treatment:** Nigerian traditional medicine is a holistic discipline involving the use of indigenous herbalism combined with aspects of African spirituality. This holistic understanding of ill-health among some ethnic groups in Nigeria makes traditional medicine prevalent and resilient amidst its encounter with western medicine that relegates it as demonic, non-scientific, crude, and unethical.

CHALLENGES

In spite of the abundance of raw materials and inherent benefit of traditional herbal medicine, the development of traditional herbal still poses a number of challenges in Nigeria. These challenges include lack of access to standard orthodox medical facilities, the lack of proper documentation, lack of clinical trials, lack of regulation and standardization, lack of sharing information among the custodians of the traditional knowledge, lack of knowledge of potential harms of herbal medicines, ineffective implementation of existing policies, inadequate collaborations between traditional and modern doctors. Most users are influenced and encouraged by parents, relatives, spouses, friends, and colleagues to use herbal medicine preparation. Other challenges facing TM in Nigeria include the following:

- **Toxicity:** Although herbal medicines are beneficial and popular among Nigeria, they are not completely harmless. The unregulated use of herbal medicines may put the health of their users at risk of toxicity. The users appear to be ignorant of their potential toxicities. Toxicity is not about the amount, but about the type of drug or chemical involved.
- **Safety:** The act that herbs are of natural origin does not guaranty their safety. Herbal medicines are perceived to be safe with no adverse effects

by most of the users. Safety of herbal medicines is erroneously attributed to their natural sources. This misconception there is limited scientific evidence from studies done to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of traditional medicine products and practices.

- **Lack of Scientific Validity:** The lack of scientific validity has definitely been an impediment. Aspects of Nigerian traditional medicine that cannot be proven by science (such as spiritism, psychic healing, soothsaying, and divination) are not part of the training of the medical herbalists.
- **Secrecy:** Secrecy still surrounds the use of the Nigerian traditional medications. Prescriptions and practices of traditional medicine tend to be very secretive and localized. Before attaining knowledge in traditional African medicine, one is often required to be initiated into a secret society. The healers is often reluctant to hand down their knowledge to anyone but trusted relatives and initiates. The mode of transmission of traditional medicine by word-of-mouth has hindered its progress. This causes an erosion of valuable traditional knowledge
- **Regulation:** There are few regulations on its use or quality control of traditional medicine in Nigeria. Most herbal products are not certified by the National Agency for Food Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC).
- **Lack of Standardization:** This is one of the biggest challenge facing TM in Nigeria. Standardization is the process of developing technical standards based on the consensus of different parties involved such as users, companies, standards organizations, and governments. Standardization can help to maximize compatibility, interoperability, safety, repeatability, or quality.

CONCLUSION

Traditional medicine may be regarded as the branch of medicine whose philosophy is rooted in the enhancement of body's own healing power through the use of natural means. Its use is growing and emerging as an issue of public healthcare importance. TM is commonly used by a pharmacist in Nigeria particularly among those practicing in the community and hospital [16]. Traditional medicine practitioners have been urged to share their knowledge with scientific researchers in order to incorporate TM in the development of the pharmaceutical sector. There is an ongoing debate whether to include traditional medicine as a course in Nigeria tertiary institutions.

The National Association of Nigeria Traditional Medicine Practitioners of Nigeria (NANTMP) has claimed to have the cure to all life threatening diseases, including Coronavirus. The association has called for stronger advocacy and awareness on natural and herbal medicine in the country. Nigeria joins the rest of Africa in celebrating 31 August 2018 as the African Traditional Medicine Day. The *Lancet* Nigeria Commission aims to reposition future health policy in Nigeria to achieve universal health coverage and better health for all. More information about traditional medicine in Nigeria can be found in the books in [17-25] and the following related journals/magazines:

- Nigeria Health Watch
- Journal of Herbal Medicine
- Journal of Ethnopharmacology
- Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine
- African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicines
- Traditional Medicine and Modern Medicine
- Journal of Traditional Medicine & Clinical Naturopathy
- African Journal of Infectious Diseases

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Figure 1 Map of Nigeria showing geopolitical zone [3].



Figure 2 Traditional medicine practitioner Malam Salisu [10].



Figure 3Bitter leaf, a popular herb in Nigeria [12].

