

**PRESURE, SPACE AND IDENTITY IN THE PRACTICE OF
TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN OGBA, GOKANA, DEGEMA
AND IKWERRE TRADITIONS**

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Abstract

Over the years, the practice of traditional medicine in Africa has undergone many stages. Until recently, this was a form of community assistance. The shaman and herbalists were duly part and parcel of the communal system where everyone was his brother's keeper. No service provider ordinarily made money from another. To an extent, the knowledge of plants roots and herbs and their medicinal potencies were for the use of community members. In the course of time, specialists emerged in the practice and some individuals started specializing in and making the practice a means of livelihood. This paper focuses on the pressure, space and identity crises which confronted the practice of traditional medicine in Ogba, Gokana Ikwerre and Degema traditions. It observed that following the upgrading of traditional medicine from a community service to a professional calling, practitioners now commercialise their service; thus, they are faced with

the challenge of space and identity. This article adopted the complementary alternative medicine theory of sickness and healing as the lens of study. It employed the historical phenomenological approach in the discussion. The work observes that the competition for space and identity has exacted enormous pressure on the practice. It concludes that the guild of traditional medicine practitioners in Ogba, Gokana Degema and Ikwerre, in conjunction with their counterparts in other parts of Africa, should convoke a conference to discuss the issues and the challenges in their field.

Introduction

Every serious medical practice which aims at bringing wellness to an infirmity begins with the why and how question. There can be no effect without a cause. In traditional medicine, the cause of illness is always seen to have a spiritual and material dimension, since it is perceived to be because of a breakdown in filial relationship that exists between humans, their ancestors, and the divinities. In his explication of the causations, using the etiological theory, Ejizu (cited in Lawrence-Hart, 2014) maintains that sicknesses and diseases can be placed under three categories to include the physical causation, the socio-moral causation, and the mystic-spiritual causation. It is no wonder that Ezeliora (1994) observed that African traditional medicine has baffled scholars because of its complete interpretation or magico-spiritual and rational elements. The practitioners use a combination of powers; the assistance from the gods and other unseen forces which are fundamental to the efficacy of trado-medicine. In any case, diagnosis and prescriptions from the practitioners could cure an indicated illness, not necessarily because the plant herb, root or other extracts may have all inherent and demonstrable pharmacological powers, but because there is life-giving potency in every given creature, especially in applying the right rituals.

Human life is challenged by myriads of problems that threaten its very existence in the universe. These forces are many and everywhere, visible and invisible, natural, and supernatural. Health is a basic human need which contributes to one's happiness and fulfilment, without which nothing else seems possible. It is no wonder then that illness, suffering and misfortunes are regarded as signs of disharmony and so detrimental to a person's fulfilment. Notably, the first law of nature is self-preservation. Therefore, it is man's determination to survive and bring these forces under control that has given rise to what is known today as traditional medicine. This paper focuses on the pressure, space and identity crises which confront the practice of traditional medicine in Ogba, Gokana Degema and Ikwerre traditions.

Theoretical Overview:

According to Eskinazi(2000), alternative medicine can be defined as a broad set of health care practices (available to the public) that are not readily integrated into the regular health care model, because they posed challenges to diverse societal beliefs and practices (cultural, scientific, medical and educational). This definition brings into focus factors that may play a major role in the prior acceptance or rejection of various alternative health care practices by any society. Unlike the current definitions, the proposed definitions would not be expected to change significantly without significant societal change.

Alternative medicine comprises a large and heterogeneous group of treatments, many of which are procedures that are not readily testable under double-blinded conditions. Furthermore, alternative medicine therapists may also possess a theoretical basis. Many stem from a cultural tradition that is singly antithetical to a quantitative, biomedical framework, or may possess little fundamental research on which to base a controlled evaluation. It is also argued that the different sets of axioms in diverse systems require a mode of evidence that the currently dominant chemical paradigm.

Traditional medicine teaches that energy flows from within, around and through all things in the universe. Energy cannot be destroyed, but can be affected negatively, leading to flow imbalance or disease. Traditional medicine does not view disease as an invasion or poisoning of the body by a foreign organism. Instead, it sees the disease as a condition in which the human body is out of balance with its milieu. Healing, therefore, is the act of manipulating the flow of energy to re-establish balance in the whole person, rather than just the area of complaint. Spiritually, unlike the allopathy, is an integral part of traditional medicine as a result, traditional medicine therapy, can be very individualised, with no two people receiving the same treatment, despite a similar complaint or the same disease. In contrast, Western medicine tends to divide the body into systems and compartments and measures functions by evaluating tissues and examining body fluid.

The Concept of Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine is as old as human existence. In the quest to respond to the challenges of human sickness and sufferings, the practice started with the collection of medicinal plants which include, among others, roots, stems, leaves, bark, flowers, fruits, seeds, etc. Also, some extracts from animals and insects like snails, snakes, chameleons, tortoise, lizards, cats, bees are used to treat any ailment humans suffered from (Aquaowo, 2000). Traditional medicine, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), “is a 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 illness”. Another scholar, Bolaji Idowu (1973), defines traditional medicine as “An art of restoring and preventing...which is applied not only to magical substances but also to medical herbs or drugs of any kind, native as well as Europeans whose properties are assessed essentially empirical”. Idowu’s assertion here incorporates the use of all medical

properties that can be assessed locally, and chemically manufactured drugs verified through the canons of sciences. Notably, this definition is broader, in the sense that it is not limited to traditional medicine but also the orthodox. However, knowledge is more than that which is empirically verifiable. The means (drugs) and the end or goal (cure or well-being) in both approaches are the same. Laguda (2003) argues that indigenous medicine practitioners, as in Ikwerre, are in themselves scientists, in that they seek to discover and use the law of the universe, not only of nature but also spiritual forces, believing there are hidden powers that can be tapped to meet various ailments. He further maintains that the operational technique of indigenous health practitioners in Africa is comparable to Western medical practices; they listen to case history of the patients, diagnose, and make prescriptions based on the experiences and directives given by spiritual elements, that is, the gods. Because of the envisaged holistic approach to prevention and care for the patients, the diagnosis often involved the consultation of the oracles which include magic, divination, and rituals to properly investigate for the purpose of ascertaining their causes. According to Owete (2013), indigenous medicine is the total combination of knowledge, ideas and practices, whether explicable or otherwise, used in diagnosing, treatment or eliminating a physical, mental, social, or social or even hereditary disease, the knowledge of which may be derived exclusively from past experiences and observation as transmitted from generations after generations.

Ogba Philosophy of traditional Medicine

The Ogba people occupy the northern margin of the Niger Delta. Among the people, traditional medicine occupies a prominent position in their practice of health care. The understanding is that one has to be healthy before he can engage in any meaningful activity. As a result, there is this wise saying that: “A healthy person does not know what

those confined are going through”. In this regard, an Ogba person will spend his last resources to procure good health.

In their search for good health, traditional medicine is highly regarded. In fact, every Ogba person has a knowledge of at least one medicinal plant. However, some persons professionalise in the practice of traditional medicine. As it were, this is a latter development.

In Ogba, sickness is identified to originate from two sources—etiological and symptomatic. While plants, roots and herbs are used to treat symptomatic ailments, etiological sickness which is not symptomatic requires divination and rituals to obtain treatment. Obodoegbulam (2019) holds that in Ogba world view, diviners and medicine men occupy an important position.

Etiological treatment, as earlier noted, involves a set of ritual where the diviner will have to consult and negotiate with the particular spirit force responsible for any sickness before treatment can be successful. In most cases, sending ritual items to the cross-road (mbaga-uzor), outsket (ishi-uzor) of the community or to the evil forest (ohiya-ojor) will be the only remedy. Where a ritual bath (Ihianmini-uzor) is prescribed, the sick person will have to be given a ritual bath at the road junction (mbaga-uzor) or outskirt (ishi-uzor) of the community (believed to be the abode of the spirits) in order to secure treatment. Here, it is believed that where the spirit receives a sacrifice, they pay with good health for the sufferer.

The rituals of traditional medicine operate on certain principles. These are;

- (i) That there are supernatural forces which govern the visible tangible world.

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- (ii) That the spirits which inhabit the super natural world can be appeased so as to release their good will in order to provide cure for sick people.
- (iii) That herbs, roots and plants have spirits which under-pin their medicinal potency.
- (iv) That apart from the super natural forces which guide the practice of traditional medicine, specific spirits inhabit and guide the different plants, herbs and roots to make available their curative potencies for the benefit of humans.
- (v) That words of mouth rendered during prayers equally carry supernatural powers.
- (vi) That such prayers must be rendered with the use of appropriate words and the officer must, at the same time, be in a pure ritual state.
- (vii) That the sufferer of the ailment in question must be in a pure ritual state and not under any obstructive influence.
- (viii) That the medicine man or shaman is not under any entanglement which is likely or possibly to make the medicine not to work.
- (ix) That the client is willing and has provided the required sum of money charged or demanded by the shaman, the failure of which is likely to make the medicine not to work.
- (x) That the client, including his relatives, is prepared to obey all the rules or prohibitions associated with such medicine.
- (xi) That for the medicine to work, all the prescribed items have been provided or made available.
- (xii) That the medicine man will need to perform all the required activities which will make the medicine to work.
- (xiii) That the medicine man has adequately acknowledged the person who gave him the medicine during the ritual prayer, energising the potency of such medicinal object.

Traditional Medicine in Ikwerre

Traditional medicine in Ikwerre society, as is the case in Ogba and Gokana, is very holistic, as it focuses on the physical, mental, psychological, spiritual and general well-being of the individual and his cosmos. It is about personal fulfilment and cosmic harmony (Asiegbu, 2000). From the foregoing, it is no gain saying that traditional medicine goes beyond the treatment of symptoms of a disease as may be manifested physically, but also about the spiritual forces that could afflict humans with ill-health and other conditions of suffering. In this wise, most sicknesses, misfortunes and sufferings are believed to be because of some evil machinations of humans through witchcraft, spirits or angry ancestors and the gods. It is with this perception of realities and precarious nature of human existence that initial reaction to sickness and sufferings of any kind is to invoke the spirits, ancestors, diviners, and medicine men. In whichever way this human misery is manifested, it constitutes a cog in the well-being of the victims, with the intention to destroy the human's material and spiritual good. The desire to regain wholeness from these malignant forces brings to the fore the role and services of traditional medicine men and women vested with the knowledge that neither the body nor the mind suffers, but the whole person (Heston et al, cited in Asiegbu, 2000). The process is ultimately oriented towards seeking a spiritual solution which is more effective than ordinary human efforts.

Besides seeking relief from misfortunes, the search to preserve and protect life against one's spiritual and physical enemies, wicked men and women is overwhelming. There is the paranoia of becoming victims of envy and targets of harmful charms, especially if one is seen to be making progress and successful in his or her life's endeavours, and the nagging fear of one's neighbours or clans with whom one has land disputes. In the real sense of the Ikwerre and Gokana world view, most sicknesses, misfortunes and sufferings are believed to be linked to the forces of evil - human and spiritual. The

former could be in the form of witchcraft, and the latter from the spirits due to some infractions against the gods, ancestors, or through invocations and other forms of manipulation. In whichever way this is experienced, they bring so much discomfort and uneasiness to human existence and are regarded as anti-life, anti-progress, and anti-wholeness. There can be no happiness or fulfilment in the face of all these fears and uncertainties about life. The assistance of the diviners, medicine men and women are often sought after to bring relief in situations like these.

The traditional medicine in Ikwerre, as obtained in Ogba and Gokana, is diagnosed through divination, sorcery, magic, witchcraft and so on. Observable symptoms are treated successfully. In a case where the illness persists, recourse is made to the diviner's expertise to unravel the real cause of the disease or the affliction and to prescribe appropriate ritual/sacrifices.

Traditional Medicine in Udekama (Degema)

In *Udekama*-Degema traditional setting, as part of Ogba, Gokana and Ikwerre societies, there was always an explanation as to why someone was suffering from a certain disease at a particular time. According to Ayodele (2002), diseases mostly revolve around witchcraft/sorcery, gods or ancestors, natural as well as heredity, which are similar to the Ogba, Gokana and Ikwerre experience. Illness in the *Udekama*-Degema/central Niger Delta cultures of Ogba, Gokana and Ikwerre is different from the allopathic Western medicine point of view. Illness is believed to be of natural, cultural or social origin (White, 2015).

Cultural or social illness is thought to be related to supernatural causes such as angered spirit, witchcraft or alien/evil spirits, even for conditions now known to be well understood in modern medicine such as hypertension, sickle-cell anaemia and diabetes. The *Udekama*-Degema, as part of central Niger Delta society, considers the human being (*owe*) as being made up of the physical, spiritual, moral and

social aspect; the functioning of these three aspects in harmony signifies good health, while if any aspect should be out of balance it signifies sickness.

Thus, the treatment of an ill person or medication of a sick person (*oweï mokpoma*) among the *Udekama*-Degema people involves not only aiding his/her physical being, but may also involve the spiritual being and social components of being as well.

The traditional *Udekama*-Degema before the advent of agent of change sees treatment of an ailment or a sick person to be holistic, and therefore uses every avenue such as psychotherapy, proficiency in faith healing (spiritual healing), therapeutic method, circumcision of the male and female, treatment of snake bite, treatment of whitlow, cutting the umbilical cord, piercing ear lobes, reducing of tooth ache, midwifery and so.

Sources of Traditional Medicine

Before the advent of change, the traditional *Udekama*-Degema people, as part of the African society, engaged in different sources of health care such as herbal medicine, divination, appeasing of the gods, exorcism, libation, orthopaedic (bone setting) is another prominent area the traditional *Udekama*-Degema (*oweï*) man uses to treat or heal people in the past even today. Here, the traditional healer, known as herbalist (*obu itain*), specializes in the use of herbs to treat various ailments (*ikpom*). Their role is very remarkable, since it arises from a thorough knowledge of medicinal properties of indigenous plants and pharmaceutical steps necessary in turning such plants into drugs, such as the selection, compounding dosage, efficacy and toxicity (Tabuti, 2006).

The *Udekama*-Degema “*Obu-itain*”, after collection of herbs from the forest such as “*Ubusaoliri; abi-egberin* (mango leaves, abisatu-scent

leaves, etc.), prepares it and administers it to the sick person. The “obu itain” herbalist uses methods like oral, rectal and nasal. Other methods include the use of steaming from the boiling plant materials or covering oneself around the fire to absorb the heat from the boiling concoction. These treatments are used to cure malaria, congestion, pulmonary problems, etc (Otekinomo, oral interview 2021).

Divination - is another means the Udekama-Degema people use to treat ailments before the advent of the modern medicine. It is a means of consulting the spirit world. It is a method by which information concerning an individual or circumstance of illness is obtained through the use randomly arranged symbols in order to gain healing knowledge. It is also viewed as a way to access information that is normally beyond the reach of the rational mind. It is a transpersonal technique in which the diviners base their knowledge on communicating with the spirit forces such as the ancestors, spirits and deities (Olupona, 2004).

This is another Udekama-Degema way of diagnosing disease. Here, the spirit world is consulted by the chief priest (Udede izu) to identify the cause of the diseases or to discover whether there was a violation of an established order from the side of the sick person. This is established through the use of cowries (ekoba), leaves (abi erurum) and other objects which are believed to be of spiritual help by the diviner. This, to the Udekama-Degema traditional voteers, is the first step in the treatment and medicine because of the revealing powers of the divination. It can be considered in modern science or medicine as consultation of the specialist (doctor).

Appeasing the gods - the Udekama-Degema people, with the belief system that nothing happens on earth, mostly when it comes to sickness or death, without a cause, always appease the gods. It is believed that a disease is caused by an invocation of a curse or

violation of taboos, making the ancestors or gods to be angry, therefore the need to appease them to avert the curse (s). The diviner (obu) appeases the ancestors, spirits or the gods according to the severity of the case.

To appease the gods, the individual is often required to provide certain items for sacrifice, such as spotless animals (dogs - abua, goat - ebui, ram - ushumas) local dry gin - akambere, and sometimes white or black cloth, eggs (fresh), etc. The use of these items is to appease the gods and avert their anger from the sick patients. After being used, the items are thrown into the river, left to rot, carried away or placed at strategies places usually at crossroads at the outskirt of the community. The traditional Udekama-Degema (owei) man believes that when this is done, the cause of the person's sickness is taken away.

Libation- libation is another way the Udekama-Degema people employ to treat the sick. According to Adjaye (2021), libation involves the pouring of some liquid (local dry gin) on the ground, followed by chanting of some words. It is regarded as prayers. The essence of the ritual is to invoke and offer supplication to the gods. In the invocation, the presence of the gods and ancestors is invited. In supplication, a request is made for mercy and forgiveness, and finally, the gods and ancestors are thanked for their help.

The traditional Udekama-Degema people use libation as a means to invite the gods and plead for mercy anytime one is sick and also to thank the gods for their help. In doing this, the diviner pours the drink on the ground, calling the names of the ancestors or the shrines to ward off the powers that are believed to have caused the sickness. When the person is healed from the sickness, the sick person or families, through the diviners, carried out some sacrifices to thank the diviner and the gods.

Exorcism- This is a practice of expelling demons or evil spirits from people or places that are possessed or are in danger of being possessed by them (Avorgbedor, 2000). The traditional Udekama-Degema people, as part of the African society, believed that illness, especially mental illness, is mostly caused by evil spirits and to cure it is by exorcism. The Udekama-Degema diviner (obu), in curing of this sickness in any patient, offers sacrifices which are carried out around the person's house or on the patient in question. Sometimes, the sacrifice will be used to circle the person's head or the house seven times before it will be thrown away to the ebbing tide. The essence of these sacrifices is to cleanse the person and heal him/her of the disease which is believed to be caused by the gods (Newton, oral interview 2021).

Conclusion

The traditional Ogba, Gokana, Ikwerre and Udekama-Degema people see sickness as not ordinary but a curse from the ancestors, spirits or gods, which, therefore, must be treated with every source of power available to them. In other words, treatment must be holistic. Thus, they employ every avenue, both physical and spiritual, to treat any ailment in the society. Similarly, despite the presence and potency of modern medicine, the people still value traditional herbal treatment to be natural, with the strong belief that it comes from the supernatural. Prior to the introduction of orthodox medicine, the health care condition of the Africans was not in the best of standards, which affected the mortality rate, as there was no known cure for some deadly diseases, like chicken pox, small pox, measles, leprosy, which went wild and rapidly caused a heavy death toll among the people. These diseases were either attributed to some evil possessions or the consequences of one form of infraction or the other against the deities and the ancestors. Besides, there were still many other diseases that were attended to using traditional herbs and methods. What is obvious today is that even with all the advancement in science and technology,

some diseases are still said to be incurable. Christianity was averse to the traditional methods of dealing with diseases, misfortune and suffering. Christians were opposed to almost all the methods which the traditionalists used when they were ill, or when they experienced a misfortune and suffering. Before the advent of Christianity, the herbalists and medicine men acted as counsellors. Some of them acted not only as doctors but as listeners to people's multifarious problems (Okeke et al., 2017). They also acted as priests and prayed for their communities. But Christian doctors are unlike medicine men of the African traditional society. This has resulted in some form of identity crisis and choice on which way to go. Many have accepted the supposed orthodox drugs, while in some health centres people are referred to go for the traditional medicines as the most potent remedies for some ailments. Admittedly, the orthodox medical practice is more developed in terms equipment and research than the traditional medicine, but what is significant about the traditional medicine is that it is more accessible and affordable and wider in its scope of services. The importance of this area of medicine cannot be overemphasized, as it is established that the recognition and demand for alternative medicine (traditional medicine) is in global demand.

Recommendations: In view of the arguments in this paper for the quest for space and identity of African traditional medicine, the research makes the following recommendations.

- (i) Alternative and complementary medicine should be incorporated into the government health care policy.
- (ii) Complementary and alternative medicine should be taught in our universities and health institutions.
- (iii) Practitioners of complementary medicine should evolve a standardized mechanism of transferring the skill to the younger generation.
- (iv) Practitioners of the two systems of health care should collaborate in their activities, as experience has shown that both are really complementary.

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- (v) Governments at all levels should set up training facilities for officers of traditional medicine, as is the case with orthodox medicine.

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2	Otekinomo Fred	M	50	Civil servant	Okaw compound	19/5/2021

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