

AN EVALUATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AS SOLUTION TO CONTEMPORARY PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

Traditional medicine is an aspect of African reality in which the African distinguished himself as against western orthodox medical practice. The question of this medical practice as a scientific enterprise has a philosophical over tone. The traditional medical practitioners are skilled practitioners who assist to improve health both within the confines of physical, mental and social wellbeing. The medical practice of the African is based on theories, beliefs and experiences that belongs to different peoples transmitted from generation to generation through training. This medical practice has been from thousands of years before modern orthodox medical practice. The application of local plants and mineral with medicinal properties accounts for its success. This paper evaluates the foundation, principles and justification for African traditional medicine as a scientific enterprise and solution to contemporary pandemic.

Keywords: Traditional Medicine, Pandemic, African reality, Orthodox Medical Practice

1. Introduction

Issues bordering on traditional African medical practice evoke mixed reaction within the purview of juxtaposing it with western medical practice. Why is this so? There appears to be distrust on the issue of methods of scientific research expected of all scientific enterprise and it is assumed that traditional medicine is bereft of it. Traditional medicine is viewed from various perspectives. It is seen as alternative medicine and folk medicine. It is the oldest form of medical practice that is culture bound and has been the source of treating diseases and various ailments that have threatened human lives. As the covid-19 pandemic has been threatening globally, traditional African medical practitioners have claimed that it can easily be cured. This may account for the issue of few deaths as a result of covid-19 in Africa.

Different societies have their traditional medical practices which forms their indigenous healing methods. Examples are the Chinese medical practice notably Acupuncture, Indian Vedic medicine like the Ayurveda etc. Due to the broad nature of traditional medicine (TM) the World Health Organization(WHO) (2000) defined traditional medicine as “the sum total of the knowledge, skills and practices based on their beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness.

African traditional medicine is usually associated with religion and oral tradition. This is why it is sometimes attributed to as folk medicine and assumed to be pseudo-scientific, mythical and disparaged in favour of modern medicine. Nature is part of the African medical practice, and religion accounts for the reason as well as provides the principles on which traditional medicine revolves.

2. Cosmological Foundation of African Medicine

The basic or foundational element of African traditional medicine is cosmological. Ejizu (1986)in analyzing the Igbos, posits that the “...the traditional Igbo cosmology is essentially a religious one. Religion provides the basic and unifying vision through which everything is perceived. It is therefore not surprising that the traditional value system and attitudinal orientations are prevalently religious.

The World Health Organization (WHO 20001) defined traditional medicine as the “the health practice, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and mineral-based medicine, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and excises, applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain wellbeing”.

With the application of plants and various herbs, and minerals, traditional medical practitioners have posited that the covid 19 can be cured. It was anticipated that African Countries will be severally affected by this pandemic. But it did not turn out to be as expected. Orthodox medical personnel are opposed to the proposition that covid 19 is very fatal

The African idea of health practices are totally aligned to the African cosmology. Ohajunbodo (2004) touched on religious African world view for traditional medicine by exposing the religious, social and cultural background of the popular phenomenon of

healing ministries in Nigeria as a peculiar African traditional response to wholeness. This shows that Africans do not divorce the importance of the seen and unseen forces in their interpretation of reality. In the words of Aghamelu (2006) "... the relationship between these two worlds is thought as symbolic, and there exist a marked relationship of reciprocity and independence between the inhabitants of the two worlds"

In Africa, traditional medicine is wholly based on theories that ascribe human beings as inseparable from their social, natural, spiritual and cosmic environment. There is the belief of an ontological link of different realms of the cosmic order such that there is a sort of parallelism to the extent that what affects one realm of consciousness invariably affects the other.

One of the approaches to medical practice is the view that diseases are treated or considered as a phenomenon that arises when an imbalance affect the vital powers governing the patient's wellbeing. These powers range from communal deities or spirit beings to smaller living organism. This imbalance can be harmonized by the traditional healer through the combination of local plants and minerals. They choose both the medicinal properties and their symbolic and spiritual significance with ritualistic procedures and in-depth knowledge of the patient's kinship and social relations, as well as their expert knowledge to execute their healing.

Symbolism is as old as knowledge itself, hence cannot be confined to the perceived knowledge of the supernatural alone, symbols also feature significantly in secular themes (Nwanegbo-Ben,J 2007) The belief in the efficacy of local herbs and plants and what it symbolizes led to the various application of the steaming therapy. Herbal medicine such as garlic, lemon, ginger, neem leaves etc, are heated and boiled together. The steam from the boiled medicine is inhaled and its solution drank. It has been observed that constant steaming and application of this procedure prevents the covid-19. This same therapy is used locally in the treatment of malaria fever. In trying to treat covid-19 alternatively Yuan xu (2020) wrote "A recent trend in the community is the consumption of herbal medicines containing certain active compounds, which have antimicrobial or antiviral, anti-inflammatory, and immunostimulatory activities, such as echinacea, quinine, and curcumin." Dr. Tumuslime explained that "If a traditional medicine product is found to be safe, efficacious and quality assured, WHO will recommend for a fast-tracked large scale local manufacturing (WHO Africa 2020).

3. Symbolism In Traditional Medicine

Symbolism plays a major role in all aspects of knowledge within science and the supernatural. Symbols may be anything such as objects, words patterns or colours. The characteristics of a symbol is that it represents something other than their intrinsic properties. Symbolism represents an object apart from its proper significance (Nwanegbo-Ben,J, 2017) It also suggests a more ideal content which it cannot actually embody. Traditional medicine cannot do without symbols neither can any applied science do without symbols in its interpretation of reality.

Symbols are theoretical entities and of practical value to thought and science in general. Dukor (2009) in explaining the panpsychic naturalized epistemology made a cogent point that shows that African science believe in unity in reality whether in the confines of the seen and the unseen reality. The African sees supernatural forces or God in every being and object. He went further to posit that the African "...understands and grapples with designators and predicates in explaining nature and medical and scientific puzzles" Dukor's position is that symbols cannot be devolved within the confines of science and the supernatural.

There is an absolute necessity to exhaust all forms of knowledge by renewing efforts into the metaphysics and epistemology of symbolism as a special category within traditional medical practice. The scientific character of symbolism in African traditional medicine cannot be over stressed because symbols are as old as knowledge. Symbols serve partly to codify and expose clearly various mathematical, scientific and religious functions. The traditional medical practitioners' applies all known methods to prosecute his healing practice. This is a distinguishing feature from the orthodox. He sometimes prepares protective charms with symbolic representation. He heals people of their sickness, diseases, discovers secrets and offers explanation to them. He enjoys the confidence of his community. Symbols in scientific knowledge as well as in traditional medicine are necessary for objective communication.

It is pertinent and worthwhile to know that traditional medicine in Africa has both empirical and supernatural realm or dimension. It is on this premise that the Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria use the word "Ogwu" both mean charms prepared by "Native doctors" and medicinal herbs for the treatment of various ailments . Thus, almost all African traditional medical practice combines the two meanings of the word "Ogwu".

4. Scientific Character Of Traditional Medicine

African traditional medicine may be intellectually despised when juxtaposed with bias as against western orthodox medical practice. Reasons may not be far from the misconception that traditional is bereft of the scientific method in its investigation. Science is simply knowledge predicated on the structure and behavior of natural and physical world based on provable facts. The popular notion on science is that it is a system of proven laws based solely on undisputed facts (David and Hawkin 1989). This position is that when we say that something has been scientifically proven, it means that it has been tested over time. It has been universally and consistently valid. African medicine may decline experimentation in the sense of rigorous research like modern science, but it hinges on trial-and-error kind of experimentation.

The major area of divergence between modern orthodox medicine and traditional medicine is in the area of diagnosis. Ailments are discovered by procedures which includes the application of authoritative testimonies, direct observation and inferences through direct observation, in this case means examining the patients using the senses and drawing up inferences through what has been deduced from all the procedures followed.

Traditional medicine applies the technique of the utilization of herbal drugs, dieting, massage and surgery when necessary. Bullets can be extracted from the body using the surgical procedures of the traditional medical practitioners. They utilize local pincers, heat and oil. Ogugua and Metala buttressed this by stating that in Anambra state, of Nigeria there is a specialist in the field of medicine specifically at Anaku-ogbe, in Ayamelu local government (Ogugua and Metala 2006).

Long before the intellectual popularity of the orthodox medical practice, African traditional medicine has been the source of wellbeing and needed cure in challenging cases. The question now is why is it now relegated to the background. One may be wondering if it is predicted on scientism, the theory that promotes science as the only objective procedure to knowledge. Or is it relegated merely out of prejudice due to racism?

The standardization of the scientific procedure is predicated on the assumption that personal opinion, culture and belief influence the interpretation of natural phenomena.

Thus, scientific procedures attempt to minimize the influence of bias or prejudice in their interpretation of nature. Does it mean that traditional medicine is hinged on prejudice since it is assumed to be folk medicine and associated with religion and oral tradition?

The major distinguishing feature of the scientific character is that the scientific researcher allows reality to speak for itself, corroborating a theory if it confirms a hypothesis and discarding a theory when its predictions proves not to be true. This process makes scientific knowledge acceptable to all irrespective of race, tribe, religion or geographical location. Traditional medicine practice has succeeded by the process of trial and error and the inductive procedure.

In “Against method” Feyerabend (2010) posit that the logical priority employed by western science over traditional medicine can only be expressed in terms of the pride of place ascribed to science. Traditional medicine has been branded “irrational” by the chauvinistic character of western science. According to him “... theories are abandoned and superseded by mere favorable accounts long before they have had an opportunity to show their virtues. Beside ancient doctrines and “primitive”: myth appear strange and non-sensical only because the information they contain is either not known or is distorted by philologist or anthropologists with the simplest physical, medical or astrological knowledge.”

The benefits of traditional medicine are overwhelming but western propaganda against it as folk medicine, irrational and Pseudo-scientific has militated against its popularity.

5. Challenges And Benefits Of Traditional Medicine

The Ontology of traditional medicine is sub-summed in both mundane and extra-mundane realities. Spirituality and herbal therapy are the essential constitutive elements in the prosecution of the medical practice. The major means of preserving this practice from generation to generation is by oral tradition. Acquiring knowledge of this practice involves attaching oneself in form of an apprentice to a practitioner. This is done either voluntarily or involuntary as it could be seen as a vocation. In so many cases, the knowledge and skills are believed to be the prerogative of particular families, lineage or community. In Imo State of Nigeria, there is a community called Orodo in Mbaitoli Local Government Area, that is noted for their expertise in orthopedic medicine. Broken and dislocated bones are treated with ease. The members of this community are seen as possessing supernatural endowment and gift for this practice. According to

Onwuanibe (1979) some societies consider the healer as half man half spirit, to mediate between the human and superhuman realm to invoke spiritual assistance in their healing processes.

One of the major challenges African traditional medicine has is lack of documentation which could have helped to sustain it. Health is interpreted as a state of equilibrium between a number of factors. It is a balance arising from the independence between human beings and the social, natural and supernatural environs. Thus, the full definition of illness is differentiated and traditional medicine would have to surmount numerous challenges if it has to be recognized and integrated into mainstream health system. The translation of indigenous conception of illness into biomedical terms would be difficult but is undoubtedly the best way to encourage productive dialogue between orthodox and traditional medical practice.

Traditional medicine thrives in modern times from the lack of access to orthodox medicine and also due to cost of medical care. Traditional medicines appear to outnumber orthodox medicine because there are more traditional medical practitioners than orthodox. Most modern or orthodox medical practitioners are found in cities hence the rural populace hardly get the services of the orthodox practitioners.

The geographical and social proximity of traditional medical care are reasons why they are most times chosen as intermediaries to be supervisors when local and community programs that pertain to orthodox medicine is taken place. One good example is the use of local mid-wives.

One other major benefit of traditional medicine is that practitioners share their patients' culture as well as the same views of health and illness and general conception of humans as it relates to the environment. It is true that some governments and non-government organizations have tried to sponsor research in traditional medicines and herbal therapies, however, it cannot be compared to the billions of dollars invested in the advancement of western medicine. Despite this, WHO described traditional medicine as the surest means to achieve total health care. This may be due to its easy accessibility to greater number of people.

6. Evaluation And Conclusion

The validity of the claim of science to give an accurate description of reality is questionable. Is it really possible for humans situated in particular cultural environment,

limited in time and space and under specific condition to ascribe to themselves absolute custodians to the concept of reality? This may not be accepted if we see science as western, African or Eastern.

It has been the desire of some physicists to explain and establish an absolute knowledge as regards reality and to discover the fundamental principle or theory that will explain everything. However, can this reconcile the melting point between the traditional medical practice and the orthodox medical practice.

The idea of progress with regards to advancement of scientific knowledge has enjoyed a variety of considerations from various philosophers and scientists. Imre Lakatos postulated the issue of scientific progress which hinges on what he called the Methodology of Science research programs. He highlighted the rationality of science. Feyerabend on his part reminded us that scientific enterprises are carried out by rational human beings with limitation, emotions and constraints. He emphasized the pursuit of knowledge as a whole not just scientific knowledge.

Taking cognizance of these discussions on methodology, it is pertinent that we pursue science with the intent on its value to the society. It has been observed that the African traditional medicine is the primary and probably the only easy and accessible health care system for the vast majority of people in Africa this accounts to the reason why various therapies have been developed to fight the covid-19 pandemic like the steaming tents.

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