

African Traditional Medicine (Agbo) and Wealth Creation in Nigeria: An Evaluation of Marketing Functions for Economic Development

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Abstract

This study examines the marketing functions associated with Agbo and how these functions contribute to wealth creation and economic development in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative research approach using an exploratory research design. Data are collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and, where appropriate, focus group discussions with purposively selected traditional medicine practitioners, Agbo producers, and marketers. Relevant secondary sources, including scholarly literature, policy documents, and reports, are also reviewed. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, the interview questions are developed in line with the research objectives and reviewed by experts in marketing and traditional medicine. The findings of the study reveal that Agbo marketing provides important livelihood and entrepreneurial opportunities within local communities. The study concludes that Agbo represents more than an indigenous healthcare practice; it is also an economic activity with the potential to contribute to employment, entrepreneurship, household income, and local economic development. The study recommends targeted marketing and entrepreneurship training for traditional medicine practitioners and Agbo marketers, improved packaging and branding practices, better access to finance and market information, and the development of appropriate distribution networks, among others. The study contributes to existing knowledge by providing a qualitative marketing perspective on Agbo as an indigenous economic activity. It extends the discussion of African traditional medicine beyond its healthcare dimension by showing how marketing functions, entrepreneurial practices, and value-chain activities can influence wealth creation and economic development.

Keywords: African traditional medicine (ATM), Agbo, Marketing functions, Wealth creation, Economic development.

1. Introduction

Traditional medicine has remained an important component of healthcare and cultural life in many African societies for generations. Long before the widespread establishment of modern biomedical healthcare systems, communities relied on locally available plants, traditional knowledge, and the experience of indigenous practitioners to respond to different health needs. Although the growth of modern medicine has changed healthcare practices considerably, traditional medicine has not disappeared. Instead, it continues to exist alongside orthodox healthcare in many African countries, including Nigeria. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) broadly describes traditional medicine as bodies of knowledge, skills, practices, and philosophies that originate from different cultural and historical settings

and are used in the maintenance of health and the prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of illness. Herbal medicine represents one of the most visible components of traditional medicine. It includes herbs, plant materials, preparations, and finished products containing plant-derived substances. In Nigeria, the use and trade of medicinal plants are closely connected with local knowledge, agriculture, forestry, informal commerce, traditional medicine practice, and household healthcare. The importance of this sector is therefore not limited to health outcomes. It also has social and economic dimensions because people earn livelihoods from collecting, cultivating, processing, transporting, selling, and using medicinal plants and herbal products. The Nigerian government has increasingly recognized that traditional medicine can have relevance beyond its cultural and health dimensions. The Federal Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (2023) established a Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine Department, with responsibilities that include policy development, regulation, commercialization, research, and the possible integration of traditional medicine into the national healthcare system. The policy direction is particularly significant from an economic perspective because it recognizes that the development of traditional medicine can be linked to research, industrial development, employment, entrepreneurship, and economic opportunities. The Nigerian Natural Medicine Development Agency (NNMDA) also plays an important role in the development of indigenous medicine. Its activities include research, development, documentation, preservation, conservation, and promotion of natural medicine. These responsibilities have implications for economic development because a better organized traditional medicine sector can create opportunities for farmers, herbal practitioners, processors, researchers, manufacturers, traders, and other participants in the value chain. Within the Nigerian setting, the word *agbo* is commonly used to describe locally prepared herbal mixtures (Ekor, 2014). The term is widely understood in everyday Nigerian usage, although the actual composition and preparation of *agbo* may differ considerably from one producer or practitioner to another. Some preparations may contain several plant materials, while others may involve different combinations and preparation methods. *Agbo* may be sold or administered by traditional medicine practitioners, herbal vendors, roadside sellers, market traders, and businesses involved in herbal-product production. This variation is important when considering *agbo* from an economic and marketing perspective. *Agbo* should not be treated as though it were a single standardized pharmaceutical product with a uniform composition. Differences in ingredients, preparation, dosage, packaging, storage, labeling, and claims can affect both consumer confidence and commercial opportunities. Consequently, attempts to commercialize *agbo* must take into account questions of safety, efficacy, quality assurance, environmental sustainability, consumer protection, and regulatory compliance. The commercialization of traditional medicine therefore brings together several areas of economic and social activity. Agriculture supplies medicinal plants; forestry and environmental management influence the availability of wild resources; processing and manufacturing create additional value; transportation and distribution connect producers with consumers; marketing creates awareness and facilitates exchange; while regulation and research provide an institutional foundation for the sector. This makes traditional medicine a potentially important value chain rather than merely a collection of isolated informal activities. Marketing has a particularly important role in this process. A product does not automatically acquire significant economic value simply because consumers need it or because its raw materials are available. Value is enhanced when products are processed, packaged, differentiated, transported, distributed, appropriately promoted, and made available to consumers at acceptable prices. Awodele et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of policy and regulation in improving the safety and development of herbal medicine in Nigeria. From a marketing perspective, these considerations are closely related to the ability of businesses to establish trust and reach wider markets.

Marketing functions traditionally include exchange, physical, and facilitating activities. In the medicinal-plant market, these activities may involve buying and selling, processing, transportation, storage, packaging, distribution, financing, risk bearing, pricing, standardization, promotion, and the provision of market information. Each function can create or preserve economic value. For example, processing can increase the value of raw plant materials, packaging can improve product presentation and protection, transportation can make products available in distant markets, and market information can assist producers in making better decisions about prices and consumer demand. Earlier Nigerian research has identified exchange, physical, and facilitating functions as important elements in the formal medicinal-plant market. These functions are particularly relevant to agbo because the sector involves several actors operating at different points between the source of medicinal plants and the final consumer. More recent policy initiatives also indicate growing governmental interest in developing a phytomedicine value chain that can contribute to rural livelihoods, employment, economic diversification, and wealth creation. The economic potential of agbo should, however, be approached carefully. Increased commercialization without quality control could expose consumers to unnecessary risks. Similarly, increased demand for medicinal plants without sustainable cultivation could increase pressure on forests and other natural resources. Marketing strategies that depend on exaggerated or unsupported health claims could also undermine consumer confidence and attract regulatory intervention. The challenge, therefore, is to develop the economic potential of agbo while maintaining appropriate standards of safety, sustainability, cultural respect, and consumer protection. Against this background, this paper evaluates the marketing functions associated with African traditional medicine (agbo) and examines how their effective performance can contribute to wealth creation and broader economic development in Nigeria.

2. Statement of the Problem

Nigeria possesses considerable biological resources and extensive indigenous knowledge concerning medicinal plants. These resources have supported traditional healthcare practices for generations and have also provided economic opportunities for individuals and communities involved in their collection, cultivation, processing, and sale. Nevertheless, the commercial development of traditional medicine remains relatively fragmented, particularly at the informal end of the market. A substantial part of the traditional medicine sector operates through informal channels. In many cases, production, pricing, distribution, promotion, record keeping, quality control, and access to market information are not organized according to consistent commercial systems. While informality may make it easier for individuals to enter the sector with relatively limited capital, it can also restrict the ability of businesses to expand, obtain financing, develop recognizable brands, access larger markets, or participate effectively in formal value chains. One important problem is the gap between traditional knowledge and modern commercial value creation. Medicinal plants can be collected from forests or cultivated by farmers, purchased by traders, processed by traditional medicine practitioners or herbal-product manufacturers, and eventually sold to consumers (Adewumi et al., 2020). Each of these stages has the potential to generate additional value. However, when the relationships between actors are weak or poorly coordinated, a significant proportion of the potential value may be lost. The problem is also reflected in product presentation. Many traditional herbal products have historically been sold with limited branding, packaging, labeling, traceability, or standardized information about their contents and use. Although traditional presentation methods may have served local markets for many years, modern consumers increasingly expect information about products before making purchasing decisions. Better packaging and labeling could therefore help legitimate producers reach new consumers and compete in wider markets, provided that such

improvements are accompanied by appropriate quality assurance.

Product differentiation is another challenge. In a market containing many herbal preparations, consumers may find it difficult to distinguish one product from another based on quality, composition, production methods, or reliability. The absence of clear differentiation can make competition depend heavily on price, reputation, personal relationships, or verbal claims rather than on demonstrable product quality. Promotion presents a related concern. Traditional medicine practitioners may rely on word-of-mouth communication, personal selling, community networks, advertising, social media, radio, television, and other promotional methods. Such communication can be useful for creating awareness and building customer relationships. However, promotional messages concerning health products must be handled responsibly. Unsupported claims about the ability of a product to prevent or cure serious illnesses can mislead consumers and potentially undermine the credibility of the wider traditional medicine sector. Regulation is therefore another major issue. Nigeria has established mechanisms for regulating herbal products, including requirements relating to registration, labeling, manufacturing, and advertising. The Traditional Medicine Policy recognizes the regulatory responsibilities associated with herbal medicines, while NAFDAC has developed guidelines relating to the regulation of herbal medicines and related products. However, the coexistence of formal and informal markets makes consistent implementation difficult. The supply chain presents an additional challenge. Evidence from Kwara State shows that medicinal-plant supply chains include gatherers, farmers, herbal medicine producers, and final consumers. Gathering remains an important source of medicinal-plant materials, demonstrating the close relationship between traditional medicine commerce and natural resources. Although this creates economic opportunities, it also creates concerns about sustainability when wild harvesting occurs faster than plants can naturally regenerate.

Recent evidence from Benin Metropolis further highlights this concern, as most of the medicinal plants examined in the study were sourced from the wild. Continued dependence on wild resources could eventually increase scarcity and raise production costs, thereby threatening the long-term economic viability of the sector. Sustainable cultivation is consequently not only an environmental issue but also an economic requirement.

Another concern is the limited availability of reliable economic information about the sector. Although individual studies have documented profitability, marketing strategies, supply-chain structures, and medicinal-plant utilization, there is still inadequate evidence showing how specific marketing functions translate into broader measures of wealth creation. For example, it remains difficult to determine the extent to which improved packaging, branding, market information, standardization, financing, or distribution directly affects enterprise income, employment, business expansion, household welfare, or local economic development. The central problem, therefore, is not simply whether agbo is commercially active. The more important question is whether its marketing functions are sufficiently developed to transform existing commercial activities into sustainable wealth creation, employment generation, value addition, entrepreneurship, and wider economic development.

3. Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this paper is to evaluate the marketing functions associated with African traditional medicine (agbo) and their potential contribution to wealth creation and economic development in Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the contribution of traditional medicine marketing to employment, entrepreneurship, income generation, and wealth creation.
2. Identify major constraints limiting the economic development of the traditional medicine sector.

3. Propose strategies for improving the marketing functions and economic contribution of agbo in Nigeria.

4. Significance of the Study

The study is significant to several groups.

1. **Government and policymakers:** The findings can assist government agencies and policymakers in considering how traditional medicine development can be connected with industrialization, agricultural development, rural employment, entrepreneurship, economic diversification, and local manufacturing. Nigeria's current policy direction places greater emphasis on commercialization, standardization, research, and the economic potential of traditional medicine. Understanding the marketing functions that support these objectives can help policymakers design interventions that respond to actual weaknesses within the value chain.

2. **Traditional medicine practitioners:** The study draws attention to the importance of improved packaging, labeling, record keeping, product differentiation, customer orientation, ethical promotion, and participation in formal value chains. Improved marketing practices could help practitioners move beyond purely informal transactions while retaining the cultural knowledge and identity associated with traditional medicine.

3. **Farmers and medicinal-plant gatherers:** Improved marketing systems could create stronger and more predictable demand for cultivated medicinal plants. If processors and manufacturers develop reliable markets for locally cultivated materials, farmers may have greater incentives to invest in medicinal-plant production. This could potentially improve rural incomes while reducing excessive pressure on wild medicinal-plant populations.

4. **Entrepreneurs and investors:** The traditional medicine sector presents opportunities that extend beyond the production and sale of herbal mixtures. Potential areas include medicinal-plant cultivation, processing, packaging, transportation, distribution, laboratory testing, branding, retailing, research, equipment supply, and related services. A better organized market could therefore encourage new businesses and investment.

5. **Consumers:** Consumers can benefit from a more organized marketing system when commercialization is accompanied by effective regulation. Better labeling, traceability, appropriate packaging, and quality-control procedures can make it easier for consumers to identify products and understand relevant product information.

6. **Researchers and universities:** The study highlights the need for multidisciplinary research involving marketing, economics, pharmacology, ethnobotany, agriculture, forestry, entrepreneurship, public health, and development studies. Such collaboration is important because the economic development of traditional medicine cannot be adequately understood from a single disciplinary perspective.

5. Conceptual Review

Concept of African Traditional Medicine

African traditional medicine refers broadly to indigenous systems of healthcare based on accumulated knowledge, skills, practices, beliefs, experiences, and locally available resources developed within African societies. It encompasses herbal remedies as well as other forms of traditional therapeutic practice. These systems are often closely connected to cultural identity, community knowledge, spirituality, local environmental resources, and intergenerational

transmission of knowledge.

The WHO (2025) recognizes that traditional medicine has developed within historically and culturally specific settings and continues to have relevance in contemporary healthcare. Its continuing presence means that traditional medicine should not simply be understood as a remnant of the past. It remains part of the healthcare and economic landscape in many societies. In Nigeria, traditional medicine encompasses a wide range of practices and products. It includes herbal preparations, traditional healing practices, and knowledge concerning medicinal plants. Because of this diversity, agbo should be viewed as one component of the wider traditional medicine and herbal-product ecosystem rather than as a uniform medicinal product. This distinction is particularly important for economic analysis. The economic activities associated with traditional medicine are not limited to the person who prepares or sells a herbal mixture. They may include farmers who cultivate medicinal plants, gatherers who collect wild plants, traders who transport raw materials, processors who prepare products, packaging businesses, retailers, researchers, laboratories, and regulatory institutions. Consequently, the sector has the characteristics of a value chain involving several interconnected participants.

Concept of Agbo

The term agbo is commonly used in Nigeria to describe herbal preparations or mixtures. In everyday usage, it may refer to liquid herbal preparations sold or administered by traditional medicine practitioners and herbal vendors. The actual composition and preparation of agbo can differ substantially depending on the practitioner, locality, intended use, plant materials available, and method of preparation. From an economic perspective, agbo can be considered a product around which a value chain develops. The chain may begin with the collection or cultivation of medicinal plants and continue through transportation, processing, formulation, packaging, promotion, distribution, retailing, and consumption. Government policy initiatives concerning traditional medicine and phytomedicine increasingly recognize the need to develop these interconnected activities. The diversity of agbo formulations makes standardization especially important. Commercial development should not be based on the assumption that every traditional preparation is identical or that traditional use automatically establishes safety or therapeutic effectiveness. Instead, greater commercial value should increasingly be associated with appropriate quality assurance, traceability, responsible labeling, evidence generation, consumer trust, and compliance with relevant regulatory requirements. A more organized agbo market could also create opportunities for product differentiation. Producers who meet appropriate standards could develop recognizable brands, improve packaging, maintain production records, and establish clearer distribution channels. These changes could make it easier for legitimate businesses to participate in wider markets. However, commercialization should not result in the loss or inappropriate appropriation of indigenous knowledge. Traditional knowledge holders should be recognized and protected within relevant intellectual-property and benefit-sharing arrangements.

Concept of Marketing Functions

Marketing functions are the activities performed to facilitate the movement of products from producers to consumers while creating utility and supporting exchange. Kalu et al. (2025) and earlier research on medicinal-plant markets demonstrate the relevance of these functions to the organization of traditional medicine value chains.

Marketing functions can broadly be classified into three major categories:

Exchange functions

These include buying, selling, pricing, negotiation, and transfer of ownership. Exchange functions are central because they bring different participants in the value chain into commercial relationships. A medicinal-plant farmer, for instance, may sell raw materials to a trader or processor, while the processor may sell a finished product to a retailer or final consumer.

Physical functions

These include transportation, storage, processing, packaging, grading, product handling, and distribution. Physical functions are particularly important for medicinal plants because the quality and usefulness of plant materials can be affected by harvesting, handling, moisture, storage conditions, transportation, and processing methods.

Processing can increase the commercial value of raw materials by converting them into products that are more convenient for consumers. Packaging can protect products while also providing information and improving presentation. Transportation and distribution make products available beyond the location where they were produced.

Facilitating functions

These include financing, risk bearing, market information, standardization, quality control, research and development, and promotion. These functions may not always be visible to consumers, but they can determine whether a market operates efficiently.

Financing enables businesses to purchase raw materials, equipment, packaging materials, and other inputs. Risk bearing is necessary because producers and traders face uncertainty concerning demand, prices, spoilage, regulation, and supply. Market information assists actors in understanding prices, consumer preferences, availability of raw materials, and market opportunities. Standardization and quality control can increase confidence, while research and development can support product improvement.

Research on Nigeria's medicinal-plant market indicates that these categories of marketing functions are important to the development of the sector. Their effective performance can reduce waste, improve coordination, increase value addition, and strengthen the ability of businesses to reach consumers.

Marketing Mix and Agbo Commercialization

The traditional marketing mix provides another useful framework for understanding the commercialization of agbo. The four major elements—product, price, place, and promotion—can be applied to the traditional medicine value chain while taking into account the special requirements associated with health-related products.

Product

Product development involves formulation, packaging, labeling, quality assurance, branding, differentiation, and presentation. For agbo, product development should involve more than making the product visually attractive. It should also consider appropriate identification of ingredients, safe preparation practices, storage requirements, labeling, traceability, and compliance with relevant regulations.

Improved product presentation can help distinguish legitimate businesses from poorly organized products. However, packaging should never be used to create a false impression of efficacy. The development of a recognizable brand should be accompanied by truthful information and appropriate quality standards.

Price

Price represents the monetary value exchanged for a product. Appropriate pricing within the agbo sector should take account of raw-material costs, processing, transportation, packaging, labor, quality assurance, regulatory expenses, and other operating costs. Consumer purchasing power must also be considered. Pricing is particularly important for small-scale producers because increases in input costs can significantly affect profitability. Transparent pricing may also help producers and traders understand their margins and identify areas where efficiency can be improved.

Place

Place concerns distribution and accessibility. Traditional medicine products may move through practitioners, markets, retailers, pharmacies where legally appropriate, specialized outlets, and other authorized channels. Distribution is important because a product cannot generate significant commercial value if it is unavailable to potential consumers. Improvements in transportation, storage, inventory management, and distribution networks could therefore expand the geographical reach of compliant herbal products.

Promotion

Promotion involves communicating information about products to potential consumers. In Nigeria's traditional medicine sector, promotional activities may occur through word-of-mouth, personal selling, radio, television, social media, signage, community networks, and other communication channels. Research has identified direct marketing, advertising, word-of-mouth, branding, and brand loyalty as important marketing practices among traditional medicine practitioners (Iwu, 2014). These approaches can help practitioners maintain relationships with existing customers and attract new ones. At the same time, promotion of health-related products requires particular caution. Marketing should provide truthful and appropriately supported information and should comply with relevant regulatory requirements. Claims that exaggerate the effectiveness of a product may create short-term attention but can damage consumer confidence and the reputation of the wider sector.

6. Theoretical Review

Marketing Functions Theory

Marketing Functions Theory views marketing as a collection of activities required to facilitate the movement of goods and services from producers to consumers. Traditional classifications generally group these activities into exchange, physical, and facilitating functions. The theory is useful for understanding agbo because the economic value of traditional medicine does not arise solely from the existence of medicinal plants. Economic value is also created through the activities performed between the acquisition of raw materials and the eventual consumption of a product. For example, cultivation and gathering provide raw-material value. Processing can create form utility by transforming raw materials into more usable products. Transportation creates place utility by moving products to areas where consumers need them. Storage creates time utility by allowing products to remain available after the period of production or collection. Packaging can protect products and improve their presentation, while promotion provides information and creates awareness. Financing allows businesses to obtain the resources required to perform these activities, while market information assists producers and traders in making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Standardization and quality control can further reduce uncertainty for consumers and business partners. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for examining how agbo can move from a largely informal economic activity toward a more organized value chain. It also helps demonstrate why improving only one marketing function may not be

sufficient. Better packaging, for instance, will have limited impact if distribution remains weak or if consumers have little confidence in product quality. Similarly, increased production may not result in higher incomes if market information, pricing systems, and distribution channels are inadequate. Marketing Functions Theory is therefore particularly appropriate for examining the potential contribution of agbo marketing to wealth creation because it links specific economic activities with the process through which products acquire additional value.

7. Empirical Review

Oguntade and Oluwalana (2011) investigated the structure, control, regulation, and marketing functions of Nigeria's formal market for medicinal-plant products. Their study identified exchange, physical, and facilitating functions as important components of the market. The researchers observed that entrepreneurs processed medicinal plants into different forms, including capsules, tablets, and infusions. Activities such as financing, risk bearing, standardization, and promotion were also identified as important to market development.

The study reported substantial market concentration, with the two largest firms accounting for 58.5% and the four largest firms accounting for 80.8% of the products examined. These findings suggest that the formal medicinal-plant market was not evenly distributed among businesses. The concentration raises questions about competition and market access for smaller enterprises. At the same time, the study demonstrated the importance of processing, standardization, distribution, and promotion in developing a more organized medicinal-plant market. Adewumi et al. (2020) examined the structure and conduct of the medicinal-plant supply chain in Kwara State using information obtained from 128 respondents. The supply chain included gatherers, farmers, herbal medicine producers, and final consumers. The study reported profitable operations among different categories of participants, with average gross-margin ratios of 0.76 for gatherers, 0.58 for farmers, 0.48 for traders, and 0.46 for herbal-medicine producers. These findings are significant because they demonstrate that medicinal plants can support commercially viable activities at different points in the value chain. The economic opportunity is therefore not limited to final product sellers. Gatherers and farmers can also generate income, while traders and producers provide additional services that connect raw materials with consumers. However, the continued importance of informal upstream activities also indicates the need for better coordination. When relationships between producers, traders, processors, and consumers are poorly organized, businesses may have difficulty planning production, maintaining quality, obtaining reliable raw materials, or responding to changes in demand. Umoh and Matoane (2025) examined marketing strategies used by traditional medicine practitioners in Nigeria, drawing on interviews, advertising analysis, media analysis, and field observations. The researchers identified direct marketing, advertising, word-of-mouth, branding, and brand loyalty as important strategies used in the sector. Their findings demonstrate that traditional medicine practitioners are not operating outside the principles of marketing. Even informal practitioners engage in activities designed to attract customers, communicate product information, build relationships, and maintain patronage. This finding is particularly relevant because it shows that marketing communication is already embedded in Nigeria's herbal medicine market. Nevertheless, communication becomes problematic when promotional messages make claims that cannot be adequately supported. The development of a stronger traditional medicine industry therefore requires promotional practices that combine effective communication with consumer protection. Kalu et al. (2025) evaluated the supply chain of medicinal plants and their products in Benin Metropolis, Edo State. Their study involved 135 respondents and found that medicinal-plant supply chains extended from forest estates to end-users. Approximately 88.10% of the medicinal plants studied were sourced from the wild, while

11.90% were domesticated. Herbalists recorded the highest earnings among the supply-chain actors examined, while retailers accounted for the largest share of monthly activities.

The findings have two important implications. First, the medicinal-plant sector provides income opportunities for several categories of actors. Second, heavy dependence on wild sources creates a potential sustainability problem. If commercial demand increases without corresponding investment in cultivation and conservation, the availability of important medicinal plants may decline. The Nigerian government's recent policy direction provides further evidence of the growing recognition of traditional medicine as an economic sector. The Federal Ministry of Health has emphasized commercialization, standardization, research, and development in relation to indigenous traditional medicine.

In 2025, the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation reported the inauguration of a committee on the phytomedicine value chain. The initiative identified objectives relating to rural livelihood development, GDP contribution, economic diversification, employment, and wealth creation. This development is important because it reflects a broader policy shift in which traditional medicine is increasingly being considered not only in terms of healthcare and cultural heritage but also as a potential contributor to economic development.

Taken together, the empirical literature suggests that a medicinal-plant economy already exists in Nigeria and that several actors derive income from it. What remains less clear is the extent to which specific marketing functions determine the level and sustainability of that income. This creates an important area for future research.

8. Gap in the Literature

Existing Nigerian research provides useful information about medicinal-plant markets, traditional medicine practices, supply chains, regulation, and marketing strategies. However, several important gaps remain.

First, previous studies have generally focused on medicinal plants, traditional medicine practices, or formal herbal products rather than specifically examining agbo as both a commercial and cultural category. The term agbo has a strong presence in everyday Nigerian society, but its economic dimensions have not received the same level of systematic attention as medicinal plants more broadly.

Second, many studies focus on individual aspects of the value chain. For example, one study may examine supply-chain structure, another may investigate market structure, while another focuses on advertising or traditional medicine use. There is comparatively less research that brings the full range of marketing functions together and examines how they interact to influence wealth creation.

Third, although existing studies report profitability among medicinal-plant actors, there is insufficient empirical evidence connecting individual marketing functions with measurable indicators of wealth creation. Such indicators could include enterprise income, employment, business expansion, household welfare, value added, tax contributions, reinvestment, and local industrial development.

Fourth, there is limited longitudinal evidence showing whether improvements in regulation, branding, packaging, digital marketing, cultivation, market information, and product standardization lead to sustained economic performance. A short-term increase in sales, for example, does not necessarily demonstrate long-term wealth creation.

Fifth, the literature contains relatively limited evidence concerning how digital technologies are changing the marketing of traditional medicine. Social media and online communication have created new opportunities for small businesses to reach consumers, but they have also created additional challenges relating to misinformation, unverified claims, product traceability, and regulatory enforcement.

Sixth, there is a need for greater attention to the distribution of benefits along the value chain. Increased market demand does not automatically mean that gatherers and farmers receive a proportionate increase in income. Future research should examine who captures value at different stages and whether small-scale producers and indigenous communities benefit adequately from commercialization.

Seventh, environmental sustainability remains insufficiently integrated into economic analyses of traditional medicine marketing. The dependence on wild medicinal plants means that commercial expansion could create ecological pressure if cultivation and conservation do not develop alongside demand.

Finally, contemporary policy initiatives concerning phytomedicine value chains create a need for updated empirical studies capable of determining whether policy intentions are translating into measurable commercial and socioeconomic outcomes.

This paper therefore contributes conceptually by bringing marketing functions and economic development into the same analytical framework and identifying specific areas where empirical research is still required.

9. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative literature-review and conceptual research design. It does not claim to have generated original survey or experimental data. Rather, it synthesizes existing academic literature, empirical studies, government policy documents, and institutional materials concerning traditional medicine, medicinal-plant marketing, supply chains, regulation, and economic development in Nigeria.

Secondary information was obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic publications, Nigerian government policy documents, WHO publications, institutional materials from relevant Nigerian agencies, and recent studies addressing medicinal-plant supply chains and herbal-medicine marketing.

The literature was examined thematically rather than statistically. Attention was given to recurring issues across the literature, including marketing functions, value-chain organization, product development, pricing, promotion, distribution, regulation, standardization, profitability, employment, entrepreneurship, sustainability, and wealth creation.

The conceptual analysis also considered the relationship between individual marketing activities and broader economic outcomes. For example, processing and packaging were considered in relation to value addition; distribution was examined in relation to market access; financing was considered in relation to enterprise development; and standardization was considered in relation to consumer confidence and market formalization.

Because the study is literature-based, its conclusions should be interpreted as conceptual and evidence-informed rather than as estimates derived from a new field survey. The identified gaps therefore provide opportunities for future empirical studies involving traditional medicine practitioners, farmers, gatherers, processors, traders, retailers, consumers, regulators, and other stakeholders.

10. Discussion

The reviewed literature suggests that marketing is one of the major mechanisms through which the economic potential of traditional medicine can be converted into actual economic value. The existence of medicinal plants and traditional knowledge provides the foundation, but marketing activities determine how effectively these resources can be transformed, distributed, and exchanged.

First, exchange functions create commercial opportunities. Buying and selling connect medicinal-plant gatherers, farmers, processors, practitioners, traders, retailers, and consumers. Where transactions are reasonably transparent and competitive, producers may

have greater incentives to increase production and improve quality. Gurib-Fakim (2006) emphasizes the wider importance of medicinal plants as resources that can contribute to health and pharmaceutical development. In the Nigerian context, the commercial exchange surrounding these resources can similarly create livelihood opportunities.

Second, physical functions provide important opportunities for value addition. Raw medicinal plants generally have a different commercial value from processed and appropriately presented products. Processing can transform raw materials into products that are easier to transport, store, distribute, and use. Packaging can protect products from contamination and deterioration while also providing information and supporting product identification.

Transportation and distribution are equally important. A medicinal product produced in a rural community may have limited economic value if it cannot reach consumers in urban or distant markets. Improved transport and distribution networks can therefore expand market access and connect rural producers with larger consumer populations.

Third, facilitating functions can determine whether commercialization becomes sustainable. Financing provides businesses with the resources required to purchase raw materials, acquire equipment, employ workers, improve packaging, and meet regulatory requirements. Risk bearing is also important because participants in the sector face uncertainty arising from changing demand, prices, raw-material availability, spoilage, environmental conditions, and regulatory requirements.

Market information can improve decision-making. Producers need to know which medicinal plants are in demand, what consumers are willing to pay, where markets are located, and how competitors are operating. Without reliable information, small enterprises may make production and pricing decisions based mainly on assumptions or informal advice.

Fourth, branding and promotion can increase awareness and help businesses differentiate themselves. Contemporary evidence indicates that Nigerian traditional medicine practitioners already use word-of-mouth, direct marketing, advertising, branding, and mass media. These methods can be effective because consumer decisions in traditional medicine are often influenced by reputation and personal recommendations.

However, marketing communication within healthcare requires greater responsibility than ordinary consumer advertising. A promotional message that simply creates awareness is different from a claim that a product can cure a particular disease. Unsupported claims can expose consumers to harm and undermine the credibility of legitimate traditional medicine businesses. Consequently, commercial promotion should be developed within an appropriate regulatory framework.

Fifth, standardization and regulation are essential to long-term market development. Regulation can sometimes be perceived by small businesses as an additional financial and administrative burden. Nevertheless, appropriate regulation can provide important benefits. Registration, labeling, quality control, and manufacturing requirements can help reduce uncertainty and distinguish compliant businesses from products of questionable quality.

Consumer trust is especially important in health-related markets. If consumers repeatedly encounter products with inconsistent quality, unclear ingredients, misleading claims, or poor packaging, confidence in the entire sector may decline. Conversely, credible quality assurance can improve consumer confidence and potentially support access to more formal markets.

Sixth, supply-chain development has direct implications for rural economic development. Evidence from Kwara State demonstrates that gatherers, farmers, traders, and producers can generate positive returns from medicinal-plant activities. Such enterprises can provide income in communities where employment opportunities may otherwise be limited.

However, the distribution of benefits deserves attention. If traders and processors capture most of the value while primary producers remain poorly compensated, commercialization

may not translate into broad-based wealth creation. Policies and business arrangements should therefore encourage fairer and more efficient value-chain relationships.

Seventh, sustainability is inseparable from wealth creation. The finding that 88.10% of the medicinal plants examined in the Benin Metropolis study were obtained from the wild illustrates the extent to which commercial activity can depend on natural resources. Ogu et al. (2024) similarly emphasize the socioeconomic significance of natural medicine resources.

If wild harvesting becomes excessive, the long-term supply of medicinal plants may be threatened. Scarcity could increase raw-material prices and make businesses more dependent on distant or unreliable sources. Sustainable cultivation, conservation, traceability, and responsible harvesting are therefore not simply environmental considerations; they are necessary for protecting the economic foundation of the industry.

Finally, the evidence indicates that Nigeria is moving toward a more deliberate phytomedicine value-chain strategy. The government's recent initiatives explicitly connect traditional medicine and phytomedicine with rural livelihoods, employment, economic diversification, GDP, and wealth creation. The important challenge now is implementation.

Policy statements alone will not create a successful industry. Their impact will depend on whether practitioners and businesses can access finance, whether researchers can work effectively with traditional knowledge holders, whether farmers receive incentives to cultivate medicinal plants, whether regulators can enforce standards fairly, and whether businesses develop the marketing capabilities required to compete.

The broader implication is that the economic development of agbo should not be measured only by the number of products sold. A stronger measure would consider whether the sector generates sustainable incomes, creates productive employment, increases value added, supports local manufacturing, improves rural livelihoods, protects natural resources, and provides consumers with appropriately regulated products.

11. Summary of Findings

Based on the literature reviewed, the study finds that:

1. Agbo forms part of a broader Nigerian traditional medicine and herbal-product economy involving several interconnected economic activities.
2. The traditional medicine market contains both informal and formal segments, with significant interaction between the two.
3. Exchange, physical, and facilitating functions constitute the major categories of marketing activities within the medicinal-plant market.
4. Processing, packaging, branding, distribution, and promotion provide opportunities for additional value creation.
5. Medicinal-plant supply chains provide income opportunities for gatherers, farmers, traders, producers, traditional medicine practitioners, and retailers.
6. Existing Nigerian empirical evidence demonstrates profitability among several categories of medicinal-plant value-chain actors.
7. Marketing communication, particularly advertising, word-of-mouth, branding, and direct marketing, plays an important role in creating awareness and maintaining consumer relationships.
8. Standardization, quality assurance, and regulatory compliance are important for consumer protection and the long-term commercialization of herbal products.
9. Weak formalization, poor traceability, inadequate market information, limited financing, and fragmented supply chains constrain the ability of the sector to achieve its full economic potential.
10. Heavy dependence on wild medicinal-plant resources creates sustainability risks and may threaten the long-term supply of important raw materials.

11. Government policy increasingly recognizes traditional medicine and phytomedicine as potential contributors to employment, economic diversification, rural livelihoods, and wealth creation.
12. There remains insufficient direct empirical evidence linking individual marketing functions to measurable wealth-creation outcomes specifically within Nigeria's agbo market.

12. Conclusions

African traditional medicine, including agbo, possesses economic potential that extends beyond its cultural and healthcare significance. It represents a network of activities involving medicinal-plant collection and cultivation, processing, transportation, financing, packaging, marketing, distribution, retailing, research, and regulation. These activities create opportunities for different groups and can contribute to income generation and employment when the value chain is properly organized.

The evidence reviewed suggests that marketing functions are central to converting traditional medicinal knowledge and biological resources into economic value. Exchange functions facilitate transactions between participants; physical functions create form, place, and time utility; while facilitating functions reduce uncertainty and provide the financial, informational, regulatory, and promotional support required for commercial activity.

At the same time, commercialization should not be confused with sustainable development. A market can be active without necessarily producing broad-based wealth. If producers remain poorly compensated, if businesses cannot expand, if employment is insecure, if natural resources are depleted, or if consumers are exposed to unsafe products, commercial activity may not produce the type of development required for long-term socioeconomic progress.

The future development of agbo should therefore be based on responsible commercialization. This means creating conditions in which legitimate traditional medicine enterprises can become more productive and competitive while ensuring that consumers are protected and indigenous knowledge is respected.

A successful traditional medicine industry would ideally connect rural producers with processors and manufacturers, encourage local value addition, improve packaging and distribution, generate employment, support research, promote sustainable cultivation, and strengthen consumer confidence. Such an approach would allow Nigeria to derive greater economic value from its biological and cultural resources without treating commercialization as an end in itself.

The objective should therefore not simply be to increase sales of agbo. It should be to build a credible, sustainable, innovative, employment-generating, and value-adding traditional medicine industry capable of contributing meaningfully to Nigeria's broader economic development.

13. Recommendations

Based on the review, the following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthen standardization

Government agencies should strengthen appropriate standards for herbal products, covering areas such as raw-material identification, processing, packaging, labeling, storage, and quality assurance. Standardization should be practical enough to accommodate legitimate small and medium-sized enterprises while maintaining necessary consumer-protection requirements. Clear standards can also help create a more predictable environment for businesses that wish to move from informal production toward formal commercialization.

2. Promote sustainable cultivation

Farmers should be encouraged and supported to cultivate medicinal plants commercially rather than depending excessively on wild harvesting. Agricultural extension services, training, access to seedlings, market information, and appropriate financing could encourage more farmers to enter medicinal-plant production.

Increasing cultivation can help protect biodiversity while also creating agricultural employment and providing processors with more reliable sources of raw materials.

3. Improve product development

Traditional medicine practitioners and entrepreneurs should be encouraged to improve the presentation and development of their products. This should include appropriate packaging, labeling, storage, record keeping, and product identification in accordance with relevant regulatory requirements. Product development should focus on improving quality and consumer confidence rather than simply making products more attractive. Any information provided to consumers should be accurate and appropriately supported.

4. Improve access to finance

Financial institutions and relevant government programmes should develop suitable financing mechanisms for compliant traditional-medicine enterprises, particularly small and medium-sized businesses. Access to finance can help businesses acquire processing equipment, improve packaging, purchase appropriate storage facilities, employ workers, obtain laboratory services, and meet regulatory requirements. Financing schemes should be designed in a way that recognizes the realities of small businesses rather than imposing conditions that most informal enterprises cannot meet.

5. Promote evidence-based commercialization

Research institutions should collaborate with traditional medicine practitioners to investigate medicinal plants scientifically while respecting indigenous knowledge and intellectual-property rights. Research should not focus exclusively on pharmacological properties. It should also examine cultivation methods, processing, storage, product stability, consumer behavior, market structure, profitability, environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic outcomes.

6. Improve promotional ethics

Advertising and other promotional activities should provide truthful and appropriately substantiated information and comply with applicable regulatory requirements.

Traditional medicine practitioners and herbal-product businesses should be discouraged from making exaggerated therapeutic claims. Professional training in responsible marketing could help practitioners understand the difference between communicating traditional uses and making claims that require scientific or regulatory substantiation.

7. Encourage local manufacturing

Nigeria should encourage domestic processing and manufacturing of compliant herbal products so that a larger proportion of the value generated from medicinal plants remains within the Nigerian economy.

Rather than exporting raw medicinal plants and importing higher-value finished products, greater attention should be given to developing local processing, packaging, research, manufacturing, and distribution capabilities. This could create additional employment and strengthen domestic value addition.

8. Develop a national research database

A comprehensive national database should be developed to document medicinal plants, supply-chain actors, market values, product categories, research evidence, cultivation information, and socioeconomic contributions.

Reliable information would support evidence-based policymaking and make it easier to monitor developments in the sector. Such a database should also be regularly updated so that researchers and policymakers can identify emerging opportunities and challenges.

14. Contributions to Knowledge

This paper makes several contributions to the understanding of traditional medicine and economic development in Nigeria. First, it brings marketing functions theory, value-chain thinking, and the structure-conduct-performance perspective together in a framework for understanding the commercialization of traditional medicine. This approach recognizes that economic value is produced through a series of interconnected activities rather than through production alone. Second, the paper shifts attention from viewing agbo solely as a healthcare or cultural phenomenon toward considering it as a potential economic value chain. This value chain involves agriculture, forestry, collection, processing, manufacturing, transportation, distribution, marketing, entrepreneurship, research, and employment. Such a perspective provides a broader understanding of the socioeconomic significance of traditional medicine.

Third, the paper emphasizes the distinction between commercial activity and sustainable wealth creation. The existence of a functioning market does not automatically mean that the market is generating broad-based development. Wealth creation requires value addition, productive employment, sustainable resource management, fair participation, business growth, consumer confidence, and institutional support.

Fourth, the paper identifies a specific empirical research gap concerning the relationship between individual marketing functions and measurable economic outcomes. Future research could examine whether improvements in packaging, branding, pricing, financing, market information, distribution, standardization, and promotion are associated with changes in income, employment, profitability, business expansion, and household welfare.

Fifth, the paper highlights sustainability as an economic issue rather than treating it only as an environmental concern. Since medicinal-plant enterprises depend on biological resources, depletion of those resources can eventually undermine business activity. Sustainable cultivation and harvesting are therefore essential components of long-term wealth creation.

Finally, the paper provides a conceptual basis for future empirical studies of agbo, medicinal plants, phytomedicine, traditional medicine enterprises, and economic development in Nigeria. Future researchers can build on this framework by collecting primary data from practitioners, farmers, gatherers, processors, traders, retailers, consumers, regulators, and other stakeholders. Such studies would help determine the actual magnitude of the sector's contribution to employment, income, entrepreneurship, value addition, and national economic development.

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