

Deconstructing The Negative Perception of African Traditional Medical Practices: A Comparative Analysis of Urhobo and Judeo-Christian Medical Practices

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues of African Traditional Health-Care Delivery System against the backdrop of misconceptions of African Traditional Medical practices as being sub-standard in comparison with Western/Judeo-Christian Health-Care Delivery Systems. The paper draws a parallel between the two systems with reference to diagnostic, curative and preventive functions. The paper concludes that while there are areas of divergence, both systems share broad affinity in diagnostic, curative and preventive functions.

Key Terms: African Traditional Medicine, Judeo-Christian, Health-care Delivery System

1.0 Introduction

Without much fear of contradiction, one can claim that the prevailing public perception of African traditional medical practices is negative. The descriptive terms used in reference to our traditional medical practices bear out the truth of this claim. Not infrequently, traditional practices are referred to as 'fetish' 'sorcery' 'unorthodox' and 'unhealthy', and practitioners as 'witch- doctor'. Only recently has it occurred to some critics and writers to adopt the less-disapproving term: 'alternative medicine' (Kofi-Tsekpo, 2004).

Beyond the issue of derogatory terms, the general perception of traditional medicine is that it is irreconcilable with the Christian faith. While there are extreme religious groups (including certain sects in Christendom) who reject every form of medical treatment Western and African as being incompatible with Christianity, the generality of those professing the Christian faith accept western 'orthodox' medicines as being compatible with their faith (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2004).

Limiting the negative attitude towards African traditional cures to religious attitudes, however, ignores the fact that many educated people who do not particularly identify with the Christian faith nevertheless repudiate African traditional medical practices. This class includes 'orthodox' doctors and medical/ health practitioners. One of their objections to traditional remedies is that the drugs lack clearly articulated dosage

(Koplan, J.P, Bond, T.C, Merson, M.H, Reddy, K.S, Rodriguez, M.H, Sewankambo, N.K, et al (2009).

Few of those who repudiate and disparage traditional cures acknowledge the fact that long before the advent of Western ‘civilization’ and the attendant colonial influences; Africans depended solely on their traditional health-care system to meet their health needs (Natako, L, 2006, Mahomoodally, M.F, 2013 and Ezekwesili-Ofili, J.O and Okaka, A.N.C, 2019) and Helms, J.E. and Cook, D.A (1999). That the system worked for the people can hardly be contested. That the system still works(at least in the perception of its adherents) is discernable from the increasing number of people who are turning to the so-called ‘alternative medicine’ to meet their health needs (Berends, 1993). In same view, Matshidico Moeti (2022) asserts that, African traditional medicine has been the trusted, acceptable, affordable and accessible source of health care for African populations for centuries and over 80% of the continent’s population relies on it.

With the advent of Western culture, the public perception of African tradition and culture (including the traditional health-care system) increasingly became negative. Arguments urged against the health-care system include the claims that:

- (i) Herbal medicines in Africa are not thoroughly researched nor well regulated.
- (ii) Traditional medical knowledge is poorly documented; and in most cases transmitted orally from one generation of traditional practitioners to the next.
- (iii) Acute adverse reactions often result from misidentification and misuse of medicinal herbs (c.f Van-Wyk et al 1997:7)

Responding to these arguments is outside the scope of this paper. Rather, we shall focus on those arguments, which are predicated on the **apriori** assumption that all aspects of African traditional medical practices are at variance with the norms and practices of the Christian faith. We shall argue that contrary to this assumption, there is a close parallel between some aspects of the African traditional health-care delivery system and the Judeo-Christian traditional health-care system, as documented in the Christian sacred text: the Bible.

1.1 Scope, Limitation and Methodology

In this paper, we shall limit the scope of our investigation of African Medical Practices to Urhobo Traditional Health–Care system. For effective treatment of the subject, we shall examine only three aspects of the Urhobo health-care system (on the one hand) and the Judeo-Christian Medical System, on the other hand. The three aspects are Diagnosis, curative medicine and preventive medicine. The methodology involves a parallel comparison of the two delineated cultures vis-a-vis the aspects investigated.

1.2 Diagnosis

A large majority of African peoples diagnose many illnesses through spiritual aspects (Dime, C.A. (1995). They address the psycho-spiritual aspects before medical aspects. It is a common belief in Africa that ‘nobody becomes sick without sufficient reason’

(Onwuanibe, 1979). In support of the African diagnosis Method, Ogah (2011) asserts that herbal cures are carried out through local methods without modern diagnostic facilities but traditional methods of diagnosis are used.

In the process of diagnosis in Africa, the traditional practitioner or the diviner (as the case may be) consults the oracle to know the cause and cure of an illness (Olupona, J.K., 2004). This is true because the African is mostly concerned with the root cause underlying the sickness, which could be attributed to lack of balance between the patient and his or her environment or the spiritual world, (Helwing, 2005) rather than natural causes or the medical and reasons behind the illness. There is no illness that is natural to an African; illnesses are the manipulations of spirits or gods. More often than not they are attributed to guilt by the person, family, village or community for moral infringement. Thus, such illness is regarded as punishment from gods or God for breaking the law of the land.

Divination is a diagnostic method in Africa. Divination is not only to find out what caused the illness but also who is causing it. This is used mostly if the illness is not easily identified. In doing this, the diviner establishes contact with the spirit world often and again through medication and sacrifices (Lindsay, J., 2005) and (Thorpe, S.A. (1993). As a result of the consultation with the spirits, an appropriate healing plant may be revealed, which is valued for its symbolic and spiritual significance as well as for its medicinal effect for the cure of the illness.

1.3 Urhobo and Judeo-Christian Diagnostic Functions

Urhobo diagnostic function is not far removed from that of other African diagnostic methods (Mokgobi, M.G, 2014). In Urhobo medical system, there are both physical and psycho-spiritual means of diagnosis.

One of the Urhobo methods of diagnosis is by physical means. This method involves physical touching and massaging. Massaging is one of the oldest methods of diagnosing illness in Urhobo before the arrival of Western Civilization, Christianity and the use of orthodox medicine/equipment. Among the Urhobo, there are gifted medicine practitioners who diagnose illness through touching and feeling with their hands, legs, ears and other parts of the body. As the masseur examines the patient, he or she is able to detect what is wrong in the body system. At the same time, re-arrangement or putting in order of the body system is done through massaging. For less serious cases, for example a general body pain, it is usual to seek for the services of a masseur who will make straight the nerves and bones and put the joints in order. On many occasions, the masseur is consulted to detect the illness to be cured. It is a normal practice in Urhobo that both parents and their children visit masseurs to be massaged periodically for the well-being of their body. Pregnant women visit *orhere* (midwife) to massage to know the health condition, the position of the baby in the womb, and the sex of the baby. Masseurs can also detect the position of bones, if they are in order in the body. In addition, they help to diagnose illnesses of little children who cannot talk, or explain how and where they feel the pains. In more serious

cases, maybe a case of child fainting or dying, a masseur can ease the nerves through massaging and the child is revived.

The second method of diagnosing in Urhobo is through psycho-spiritual means. Urhobo use divination, to find out the causes of illness and calamities. Not all illnesses call for divination, except the serious ones. Such illnesses could be caused by taboos, abominations, misfortunes through natural causes, breaking of covenants, curses or punishment for a wicked person.

This method of diagnosis calls for meditation, medication and sacrifices. The gods and spirits are consulted and various appeals are made to know “where”, “what”, “who” and “how” the matter at hand could be solved. If the ancestors cause it, diagnose the interference of the ancestors to know their displeasure. These two ways of diagnosis in Urhobo medical practices – physical and psycho-spiritual are very special to them.

The Judeo-Christian diagnostic function is almost the same with the Urhobo medical practices. Although the Judeo-Christian diagnostic methods forbid “divination” (i.e. to seek help from foreign gods) the Bible encourages the use of prophets instead of diviners. The foundation of the Judeo-Christian medical practices is traced to Africa hence, their medical system is similar. Thorwald (1963) confirms the claim that Moses would have been taught about sanitation and medical practices in Egypt. In addition, it is not for nothing that some medical historians labeled the Egyptian practices as “Sewage Pharmacology”.

Most of the illnesses recorded in the Bible were not proved to be diagnosed. The Bible is silent on the African physical method of diagnosing illness but it is believed that the Jews practiced it. The Bible draws attention to the duties of the priests to the lepers before they could be accepted back to the community (Lev. 13:2-3, 14:2-32). And the midwives who have the same functions as that of the Urhobo priests or medical practitioners (Ebo) and masseurs (Irhore) that take care of pregnant women through the various stages of the pregnancy to the delivery of the baby. If the Jewish community used priests to ascertain the health status of lepers or those afflicted with infectious diseases before acceptance into the community; if the services of midwives were used to deliver their children, it is also highly likely that there were other physical and psycho-spiritual methods of diagnosis used which are not recorded in the Bible. Clearly, the ancient world was confronted with diseases and perils of childbirth, and it is reasonable to infer that appropriate physical and psycho-spiritual diagnoses were employed.

On psycho-spiritual means of diagnosis, the Judeo-Christian and the Urhobo practices are almost the same method. In Africa, the gods play an important role in human health while the Judeo-Christians rely on God for revelation (diagnosing) and healing. They also attribute health and illness to a divine source like the Urhobo.

In the Bible, there is ample evidence of consulting a (God) to find out the causes of both physical and spiritual health problems and challenges. When an important figure, such as a king, priest, army captain (and so on), is sick to the point of death and there is no remedy, a seer or prophet will be visited or consulted to find out the cause of

the illness and the possible solution. This practice was peculiar to the Judeo-Christian world and it became a diagnostic method in their medical health care system.

In 1 Kings 4:1-17 for example, God was consulted to diagnose an illness; King Jeroboam's son, "Ahijah" was terribly sick, and the father, King Jeroboam sent his wife to prophet Ahijah, (his son's name sake), at Shiloh for a solution. Although, the child later died, it is clear indication that the Jews diagnosed illness through divination like the Urhobo. Adelowo (1987) compared divination to diagnosis in the modern sense.

1.4 Curative Functions

Traditional African medicine is a holistic discipline involving indigenous herbalism and African spirituality, typically involving , diviners, midwives, and herbalists (Chavunduka, E.L, 1990); Hewing (2005) viewed African medicine from this angle while Idu (2009) defines traditional medicine as:

Health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and mineral-based medicines spiritual therapies manual techniques and exercises applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illness or maintain well-being.

In a broader sense, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2008) sees traditional medicine as:

The total combination of knowledge and practices, whether explicable or not, used in diagnosing preventing or eliminating physical, mental or social diseases and which may rely exclusively on past experience and observation handed down from generation to generation, verbally or in writing.

From the above definition of traditional medicine, it is obvious that African medical system is capable of curing various and diverse types of illnesses such as cancer, psychiatric disorder, high blood pressure, cholera, epilepsy, asthma, eczema, fever, anxiety, depression, urinary tract infections, gout and wounds and burns. In spite of this, western medical practitioners in Nigeria (doctors) still have some reservations prescribing herbal medicines for their patients, (Pharmanews, 2010)

Azugbo (2012) argues that, "in the ancient days, our forefathers did not take modern medicines. They used to take herbs and leaves and that is why they lived longer and stronger". It should be noted that African medicines are curative and should ideally be prescribed without bias.

The African pattern of healing / treatment differs greatly from Western Methods but is synonymous to the Judeo-Christian medical practices. This African healing process involves drinking herbal preparation, the application of suppositories by the inhalation of vapours or medicines applied to a cut in the skin or skin disease. There are illness that need an herbalist or bone setter and others, which require the services of a seer or a priest in Africa (White, P, 2015).

1.5 Urhobo and Judeo Christian Curative Functions

In this subsection, we draw a parallel between Urhobo curative medicines and Judeo-Christian curative medicines. Specifically, we shall consider the following aspects:

Uhuvwu (Herbalism)

According to Elujoba (1998) herbal medicines are drugs made of herbs and medicinal plant, traditional medicine portions, traditional remedies and forest health products among others. On the other hand WHO (1996) defines herbal medicines as finished labeled medicinal products that contain as active ingredients aerial or underground parts of the plant or other materials or combinations thereof whether in the crude state or as plant preparation.

The above definitions are true of herbalism of both Urhobo and Judeo-Christian medical system.

In Urhobo *Uhuvwu* (herbalism) is used to cure illness. Ubrurhe (2003) expressing the usefulness of herbalism asserts that African medicinal plants and their remedies are efficacious. The use of *Uhuvwu* (herbalism) consists of about 90% of the medicinal herbs and vegetables and parts of animals, insects and some other ingredients. *Uhuvwu* is common and useful to the Urhobo. Although the efficacy of Urhobo traditional herbs is attested to, some are also harmful if used wrongly. There are Urhobo traditional herbs that can cure many diseases. For instances “Eshashaerivwi” is an Urhobo herb that can cure Ulcer, headache and eye problems. A mixture of a liquid abstracted from plantain stock (ameugbugbu) and Urhobo native pomade (amibiurhobo) dropped into the eyes of a schizophrenic patient will cause the patient to sleep thereafter corrects or restores the brain (Ake, interview, 2020). The Urhobo herbal system of medication has cured different types of illnesses and this is one of the oldest methods of therapy in Urhobo. There are hardly any ailments in Urhobo, which defy herbal cure. Almost all the illnesses are curable with herbs except those that have spiritual causes that need divination to know the cause and cure. The cure of this type of illness may involve sacrifice(s) (as the case may be) as suggested by the priest or diviner (Ayodele, S.J, 2002).

The Judeo-Christian Curative Medical System is similar to the Urhobo healing practices. Like the Urhobo people, the Judeo-Christian believes that herbs are for healing (Ezekiel 47:12). Moreover, they have different categories of herbs. The Bible in the Old testament talks about bitter herbs which are medicinal and also good for food (Ezekiel 47:12, Exodus 12:8, Number 9:11, and Lamentation 3:5). The Judeo-Christian system has salt herbs (Job 30:4) as well as a garden of medicinal herbs (II Kings 4:39). The secret of the Judeo-Christian healthy nature is their knowledge of medicinal herbs which they used on a daily basis for cures and food. The fact that they failed to specify the illness each of the herb cures does not dispute the curative functions of the herbs.

***Ori* (Balm)**

The Urhobo also cure illness with *Ori* (balm). This *Ori* is a special cream prepared with oil, herbs, parts of animal, fish, birds, reptiles, bark of trees, root of trees and other ingredients. After drying the items, and grinding, they are cooked with oil or local pomade to form a medicinal special balm. The balm is used to rub and it heals skin diseases, cure illnesses and relieves severe pains. The effects of such balm abound in Urhobo. This balm cures rheumatism, general body pains and weakness. There is also special balm prepared to strengthen a man's sexual ability. Moreover, others to improve the fertility power in both men and women, to correct bone dislocation, and healing of both partial and full stroke.

For example, the Urhobo have a special balm prepared with the fat that is extracted from snake (Boa) "Ogbo" that cures burnt skin and enables the body to produce a fresh smooth skin. These creams can also be made in soap form which when applied through bath brings healing to the entire body; some of these balms can be mixed with 'amibiurhobo' (nature pomade) instead of rubbing, it is licked to cure cough and other dangerous stomach diseases.

The Judeo-Christian counterpart of the Urhobo *Ori* is their healing balm. Their healing balm heals different ailments like the *Ori* of Urhobo. Though the Bible did not mention different names of sicknesses cured with the balm, many diseases are mentioned in the Bible. Among them are tuberculosis (phthisis) (Leviticus 26:16); sand-fly disease, black fever (leishmaniasis) (Deuteronomy 28:27) jaundice (yellow skin) (icterus) (Deuteronomy 28:22). Leprosy and other skin diseases; Gonorrhoea (Leviticus 15); Epilepsy (Numbers 24:4). Black-ache (Lumbago) (Ezekiel 21:11) Infection of the bone (Osteomyelitis) (Proverb 14:30) Although not specifically mentioned by name, eye disease such as blepharitis, ciliaris and gonorrhoea ophthalmic undoubtedly existed, but Senile cataract frequently occurred among the ancient Hebrew (Genesis 48:10) These other sicknesses in the Bible were possibly healed with the balm. This balm is efficacious to the extent that it was given out as gift to a dear person for healing of different diseases (Genesis 43:11). It is a pain relief (Jeremiah 51:8). The Judeo-Christian balm is known as Healing Balm because of the curative power to many illnesses (II Chronicles 28:15).

In the Old Testament period, there were special cities of healing or healing centers. These healing centers were known to be so because of their medical practices or health care services. Gilead, for example, had a powerful healing balm known as Gilead Balm (Genesis 37:25, Jeremiah 8:22; 46:11) Gilead was one of the healing homes to the whole of Israel and beyond in their days. They also had medicine stores where they bought and sold medicines. Thus, the Balm was both a cure and a source of income (Ezekiel 27:17)

***Egba* (Bandage)**

The special medicines for bandage in Urhobo are mostly prepared with bark/root of trees, leaves or herbs, spices and other things pounded together, put on the broken leg, hand, waist, chest, backbone and other part of the body of the affected person, then tied

with pieces of cloth for two or three days. This could be done repeatedly until healing takes place. *Egba*-bandage type of medication has healed many, most especially victims of motor accident rejected from treatment by doctors in the hospitals to go home and die. The bandage medical system of Urhobo is very efficacious. The medicine goes with native oil. They also cure sores and wounds with it.

This health care service of *Egba*-bandage is not only common to the Urhobo but it was also practiced in the Judeo-Christian world. Isaiah, 1:6 referred to someone beaten up and there was no bandage on the sores and wounds inflicted on him while in Luke 10:34, Jesus referred to their old way of life of the Israel in which a good fellow helped to bandage the sores and wounds of another fellowman after pouring oil in the wounds and sores.

Udi-Ogogoro (wine)

Many have forgotten the curative functions of *Ogogoro* today because of the Christian doctrine forbidden people to use it. Another curative element in Urhobo medical system is “Udi-Ogogoro” or “Agbakara” the Urhobo native dry gin produced from palm wine. *Ogogoro* functions in diverse ways. It works the engine of body system to be smart and effective to discharge its duties. It also gives courage and ability to talk. It cures different fevers and other illnesses in the body such as stomachache or pains.

In the ancient past, there was a known illness called “Ifi” (yaws) a tropical skin disease that caused large red swellings that turned into sores all over the body. According to Udjoh (interviewed in 2020) the use of *Ogogoro* known as *Agbakara* has driven away “Ifi”. Thus, yaws has been totally cured in Urhobo through the usage of wine known as *Agbakara*. The purely produced *Agbakara* known as “otuwan” is medicinal and highly recommended.

Wine is also used by the Judeo-Christians for different purposes in the Bible. It is true that there are different categories of wine and used in different functions and occasions in the Bible. However, the Bible warns against too much of it, but wine was used by the Jews for medical purposes like the Urhobo people. The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:34 tell of how wine was used as a medicine for curing wounds and sores. Apostle Paul also advised his spiritual son Timothy from the knowledge gained from the health care medical system of the Judeo-Christian to take a little of wine for the stomach sake (I Timothy 5:3). Wine is curative and so, it is very important in both Urhobo and Judeo-Christian medical health care system

Esivwo re esegbuyata (faith healing)

Faith healing is common in Urhobo. This is true of sickness, which is spiritual. After sacrifices are made and prayers offered, the affected person receives healing. Faith healing is mostly practiced by the ‘igbe orhen’ cult in Urhobo. They heal all kinds of sicknesses and diseases through the rubbing of kaolin (Orie) on the person and offer prayers; the faith of the person heals him or her. Ubruhe, (2003) attests to this kind of healing in Urhobo nation to be real. If it is an abominable sickness, the person involved will be made to confess his or her sins and be prayed for; healing of faith then takes

place. Mume (1976) on the issues of Urhobo methods of healing said that ‘Nigeria has more members of therapy than other countries of the world’. This is true because of many other therapies in the Urhobo land that have not been documented.

The Judeo-Christian medical practice is more on faith healing. They attach all their healing methods to God through faith. Once one repents of sin, confesses and professes faith on God, healing takes place. (II Chronicles 7:14).

There are many similarities between the Urhobo and Judeo-Christian medical practices in terms of faith healing. The Old Testament records of such healing abound. The healing of Abimelech (Genesis 20:17) the healing of Israelites bitten by serpents (Numbers 21:6-9), the healing of Naaman (II Kings 5:1-9) and healing of Hezekiah (II Kings 20:1-7).

Ohwevwechiro (fasting)

Apart from some of Urhobo medicines that deny the patient food for a short period to enable the medicine to work, the ‘Igbe’ cult has fasting as a usual practice periodically; they set themselves into fasting. They also prescribe fasting as a method of healing sickness. *Igbe* people also attach importance to fasting because of its spiritual influence on spiritual matters or sicknesses. It is a means to get the spiritual understanding of the patient’s problem and it prepares patient spiritually for the spiritual healing. In the Old Testament, fasting is an important element in the Jewish religion and tradition. They believe that fasting and prayer bring them closer to God and thereby healing and blessing will be theirs. The Pharisees fast a number of days in each week to obtain God’s favour and leadership each week.

1.6 Preventive function

One of the functions of traditional medicines is to prevent illness. Stanley (2014) and WHO (2002) observes that millions Africans up to 85% depend solely on Africa plants and medicine for primary health care. Abdullahi (2011) is not far from the view of Stanley. He noted that traditional medicine was the dominant medical system before the establishments of the cosmopolitan medicine. Regrettably, the African herbal medicines are not adequately, researched and are weakly regulated (Mill, Cooper seedy et al 2005). As noted before, different medicine and methods are used to provide solutions to natural misfortunes and supernatural ones. Some traditional healers use charms, incantation and the casting of spells in preventing illness from individual or community. African medicines that address the body soul, matter and spirit and their interactions in the world of the spirits is often referred to as form of magic (Westerlund, D. 2006) and (Cheetham, R.W.S. and Griffiths, J.A.1982). Some of preventive medicines are directed to the spirit world. This can be a ritual or sacrifice done to appease the ancestors or gods to prevent them from such sickness or ailment.

1.7 Urhobo and Judeo-Christian Preventive Functions

Urhobo preventive medical system is very active. They cure and the same time prevents illnesses and diseases from people and community.

Ubrurhe (2003) clarifies the point that Urhobo herbal and medical system displays some mystical forces. For example, *Ifue* (antidote) counteract disease while ‘ekpofia’ or ‘orhakpo’; sends or returns any spiritual attack or spiritual sickness from the target person or place. Other Urhobo medicines prevent the body from sickness.

Urhobo also has preventive medicine to drive dangerous people (thieves) and animals from them and their farms. The preventive medicine for snake is “Ekan” (bitter kola-nut) when dried, ground and spread around the area, it prevents snakes from the areas. Other medicines neutralize snakes poison when it bites.

The Judeo-Christian medical system forbids some of these practices in Urhobo. They also prevent sickness and spiritual attack through prayer and fasting as recorded in the Bible. To prove the closeness of the Judeo-Christian medical practices to the Urhobo is the case of snakebite. The Judeo-Christian has a medicine to charm snakes from biting (Isaiah 3:18-23) while the Urhobo has the medicine to prevent and neutralizes snakes and its poisons.

1.8 Conclusion

This paper set out to draw a parallel between the Urhobo health-care system and the Judeo-Christian tradition of health-care delivery. The following aspects were examined: diagnosis, curative and preventive functions. The paper noted that while there are areas of divergence, the two cultures share affinity in many areas particularly in the use of herbal curative measures such as the use of herbal remedies, the use of balm and diagnosis through divine means. Given these areas of convergence, the prevailing negative attitude towards African traditional medical practices as being opposed to Christianity clearly lacks any basis in scriptural fact.

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