

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

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.29332.65925

Abstract

Over the years, the practice of traditional medicine in Africa has undergone many stages. Until recently, this was a form of community assistance. The shaman and herbalists were duly part and parcel of the communal system where everyone was his brother's keeper. No service provider ordinarily made money from another. To an extent, the knowledge of plants roots and herbs and their medicinal potencies were for the use of community members. In the course of time, specialists emerged in the practice and some individuals started specializing and making practice a means of livelihood. This paper focuses on the pressure, space and identity crises which confronted the practice of traditional medicine in Ogba, Gokana Ikwerre and Degema traditions. It observed that following the upgrading of traditional medicine from a community service to a professional calling, practitioners now commercialise their service thus, are faced with the challenge of space and identity. This article adopted the complementary alternative medicine theory of sickness and healing by Eskinazi (2000) as the lens of this study. It employed the historical phenomenological approach in the discussion. The work observes that the competition for space and identity has exacted enormous pressure on the practice. It concludes that the guild of traditional medicine practitioners in Ogba, Gokana Degema and Ikwerre in conjunction with their counterpart in other parts of Africa should convoke a conference to discuss the issues and challenges in the field.

Keywords: Pressure, Identity, Traditional Medicine, Traditions

Introduction

Every serious health care practice which aims at bringing treatment to any sickness, begins with the why and how question. This is owing to the general perception in Africa and other parts of the world that, there can be no effect without a cause. In the practice of traditional medicine in Africa, the cause of illness is always seen to have a spiritual and material dimension. Thus, it is perceived to come as a result of breakdown of filial relationship that exist between humans, their ancestors, and the divinities. In his explication of the causations using the etiological theory, Ejizu cited by Lawrence-Hart (2014) maintains that sicknesses and disease can be placed under three categories to include the physical causation, the socio-moral causation, and the mystic-spiritual causation. It is no wonder, that, Ezeliora (1994) observed that, African traditional medicine baffled scholars because of the complete interpretation or magico-spiritual and rational elements. The practitioners use a combination of powers; the assistance from the super natural and other unseen forces which are fundamental to the efficacy of the trado-medicine. In any case, diagnosis and prescriptions from the practitioners could cure any identified illness not necessarily because the plant herb, root or other extracts have all inherent and demonstrable pharmacological powers but because there is the general belief that plants, roots and herbs especially when the requisite ritual are integrated, can facilitate recovery.

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

This article adopted the complementary alternative medicine theory of sickness and healing by Eskinazi (2000) as the lens of this study. It employed the historical phenomenological approach in the discussion. The work observes that the competition for space and identity has exacted enormous pressure on the practice. It concludes that the guild of traditional medicine practitioners in Ogba, Gokana Degema and Ikwerre in conjunction with their counterpart in other parts

of Africa should convoke a conference to discuss the issues and challenges in the field.

Theoretical overview:

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

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

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

The concept of Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine is as old as human existence. In the quest to respond to the challenges of human sickness and sufferings, the practice started with the collection of medicinal plants which will include among others, roots, stems, leaves, bark, flowers, fruits, seeds etc. Also, some extracts from animals and insects like snails, snakes, chameleons, tortoise, lizards, cats, bees are used to treat any ailment he suffered from (Aquaowo, 2000). Traditional medicine, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), “is a sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of physical and mental illness”. Other scholars like Bolaji Idowu (1973) defines traditional medicine as “An art of restoring and preventing...which is applied not only to magical substances but also to medical herbs or drugs of any kind, native as well as Europeans whose properties are assessed essentially empirical”. Idowu’s assertion here incorporates the use of all medical properties that can be assessed locally, and chemically manufactured drugs verified through the canons of sciences. Notably, this definition is broader in the sense that it is not limited to traditional medicine but also the orthodox. However, knowledge is more than that which is empirically verifiable. The means (drugs) and the end or goal (cure or wellbeing) in both approaches are the same. Laguda (2003) argues that Indigenous medicine practitioners as in Ikwerre are in themselves scientists; In that they seek to discover and use the law of the universe, not only of nature but also spiritual forces, believing there are hidden powers that can be tapped to meet various ailments. He further maintains that the operational technique of indigenous health practitioners in Africa is comparable to western medical practices; they listen to case history of the patients, diagnose, and make prescriptions based on the experiences and directives given by spiritual elements, that is, the gods. Because of the envisaged holistic approach to prevention and care for the patients, the diagnosis often involved the consultation of the oracles which include magic, divination, and rituals to properly investigate for the purpose of ascertaining there causes. According to Owete (2013), indigenous medicine is the total combination of knowledge, ideas, and practices whether explicable or otherwise, used in diagnosing, treatment or eliminating a physical, mental, social, or even hereditary disease. The knowledge of which may be derived exclusively on past experiences and observation as transmitted from generations after generations.

Ogba philosophy of traditional medicine

The Ogba people occupy the northern margin of the Niger Delta. Among the people, traditional medicine occupies a prominent position in their practice of health care. The understanding is that one has to be healthy before he can engage in any meaningful activity. As a result, there is this wise saying that “A healthy person does not know what those confined are going through”. In this regard, an Ogba person will spend his last resources to procure good health.

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

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

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

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

- (i) That there are super natural forces which govern the visible tangible world.
- (ii) That the spirits which inhabit the super natural world, can be appeased so as to release their good will in order to provide cure for sick people.
- (iii) That herbs, roots and plants have spirits which under-pin their medicinal potency.

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

The Gokana experience

In Gokana like other parts of the Niger Delta, sickness and healing operate on certain ideologies. This perception is based on the world view that health matters must be tackled holistically. However, among the Gokana, specialists evolved to attend to specialised incident of health challenge, as the discussion bellow indicates.

A broken bone in any region of the body is a fracture otherwise known as "BUNA KPOO" among the Gokana people of Ogoni. This is generally believed to be caused by numerous factors such as falling from a height, home or road accident, tackle, etc and at any point this occurs, the sufferer experiences pains, swelling and in most cases discoloration of skin within the affected region.

Hence, when this occurs adequate care and attention is given to remedy or cure such an individual.

In attempt to cure the person, he is taken to a specialist who operate under the general name of (dombie) where he is to be treated. The first treatment given is to carefully massage the affected region after which alligator pepper(kel) and locally distilled gin (Mii Beke) is applied to avoid clothing of blood. The essence of this is to treat the wound first before the fractured region is treated.

When the wound heals, attention is turned to joining the bone (Akpo/Kpoo). At this stage, the bone is thoroughly massaged after which traditional medicine prepared with herbs is applied on the region affected using a merge-like basket known as "Sagara" among the Gokana people to wrap it. The purpose of the above measure is to prevent the medicine applied from falling off. This is done simultaneously and after some days the merge-like basket is untied in order to apply a fresh medicine after which is it covered again. This is routinely followed until there is a sign of improvement in health before it is removed and stopped.

Malaria treatment: Traditional method of treating malaria in Gokana involves the following.

- i. Quaver leaf (Yah ekwava)
- ii. Lemon grass (Yanyor)
- iii. Lime fruit (unripe) (Kae-mene-dede)
- iv. Ginger (Zinza)
- v. Water (Maa)

After collecting the items listed above, the sufferer is required to boil them very well, to bring the medicinal potencies, filter the liquid and drink twice daily after warming. Each preparation serves for three days.

Another method takes the following procedure:

- i. Mango bark (Ekpa mango)
- ii. Lemon grass (Yanyor)
- iii. Paw-paw leaf (Yah temene)
- iv. Paw-paw fruit (unripe) (Ekporo temene)
- v. Lime fruit (Kae-mene-dede)
- vi. Water (Maa)

Add together and cook it to a maximum boiling point, filter and drink twice daily after warming

Traditional medicine in Ikwerre

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

Besides seeking relief from misfortunes, the search to preserve and protect life against ones spiritual and physical enemies, wicked men and women is overwhelming. There is the paranoia of becoming victims of envy and targets of harmful charms especially if one is seen to be making progress and successful in his or her lives endeavours, and the nagging fear of one's neighbours or clans with whom one has land disputes. In the real sense of the Ikwerre and Gokana worldview, most sicknesses, misfortunes, and sufferings are believed to be linked to the forces of evil- human and spiritual. The former could be form of witchcraft, and the later from the spirits due to some infractions against the gods, ancestors or through invocations and other forms of manipulation. In whichever way this is experienced, they bring so much discomfort and uneasiness to human existence and are regarded as anti-life, anti-progress, and anti-wholeness. There can be no happiness or fulfilment in the face of all these fears and uncertainties about life. The assistance of the diviners, medicine men and women are often sought after to bring relief in situations like these.

The traditional medicine in Ikwerre as obtained in Ogba and Gokana, is diagnosed through divination, sorcery, magic, witchcraft and so on. Observable

symptoms are treated successfully. In a case where the illness persists, recourse is made to the diviner's expertise to unravel the real cause of the disease or the affliction and to prescribe appropriate ritual/sacrifices.

Traditional medicine in Udekama (Degema)

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

Cultural or social illness is thought to be related to supernatural causes such as angered spirit, witchcraft or alien/evil spirits, even for condition now known to be well understood in modern medicine such as hypertension, sickle-cell anaemia and diabetes. The *Udekama*-Degema as part of central Niger Delta society considers the human being (*owei*) as being made up of the physical, spiritual, moral and social aspect, the functioning of these three aspects in harmony signifies good health, while if any aspect should be out of balance it signifies sickness.

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

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

Sources of traditional medicine

Before the advent of change, the traditional *Udekama*-Degema people as part of African society engage in different sources of health care such as herbal

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

The *Udekama-Degema* "Obu-itain" after collection of herbs from the forest such as "*Ubusaoliri*; *abi-egberin* (mango leaves, abisatu-scent leaves etc prepares it and administers to the sick person. The "obu itain" herbalist uses methods like oral, rectal and nasal. Other methods include the use of steaming from the boiling plant materials or covering oneself around the fire to absorb the heat from the boiling concoction. These treatments are used to cure malaria, congestion, pulmonary problems etc (Otekinomo, oral interview 2021). The treatment of malaria among the *Udekama* people, is similar to what obtains in Gokana as earlier mentioned in this article.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

The traditional Ogba, Gokana, Ikwerre and Udekama-Degema people see sickness as not ordinary but caused by the ancestors, spirits or divinities and therefore must be treated with every source of power available to them. In other words, treatment must be holistic. Thus, majority of the ethnic societies in the central Niger Delta, employ both physical and spiritual means to treat any sickness in the society. Similarly, despite the successes of modern medicine the people still value traditional herbal treatment to be natural, with the strong belief that it comes from the super natural.

On the contrary, Christianity was averse to the traditional methods of dealing with diseases, misfortune, and suffering. Christians were opposed to almost all the methods, which the traditionalists used when they are ill, or when they are faced with misfortune and suffering. Before the advent of Christianity, the herbalist and medicine men acted as counsellors, priests, opinion leaders and diviners. Unfortunately, western-styled medical practitioners are unlike medicine men of the African traditional society. This has resulted to some form of identity crisis on which way to go. Many have accepted the supposed orthodox drugs while in some health centres people are referred to go for the traditional medicines as most potent remedies for some ailments. In the light of the fore-going argument, the paper concludes that the guild of traditional medicine practitioners in Ogba, Gokana, Ikwerre and Udekama (Degema) in conjunction with their counterpart in other parts of Africa, should convoke a conference to discuss the issues and challenges in the field.

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

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

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

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

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- IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 7. No. 4. (2021)
ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)
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