

THE RESILIENCE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL MEDICATION IN MODERN AFRICAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The interest in African Tradition Religion is not only restricted to Africa, but also to the entire globe. The religion that has been described with derogative terms by Christian missionaries has done a lot to the development of contemporary Africa, and not much has been documented in relation to the subject matter. The phenomenological approach is hereby used to carry out investigation and document such. It was discovered that African Traditional Religion has been of immense benefit to Africa as a continent and beyond. It is the repository of the people's culture. It has acted as a mechanism of social control through its divinatory systems and also its shrines are institutions of traditional adjudication. The diviners, the medicine men or herbalists are votaries of the religion.

Introduction

African Traditional Religion is that religion that is indigenous to Africa and it is traditional because it is handed down from age to age through oral tradition. The origin of the religion and its morality is established in mythology. But its faith, principles and moral values, precepts and customs, its practices and promises are all embodied, conserved and transmitted by oral tradition from generation to generation. For instance, Ekwealo upholds that divination is the vehicle with which diagnosis is carried out and it reveals authentic information as to how the patient would be made healthy.¹

The question that comes to the fore is should a religion of this magnitude, be classified as weak and contemporarily irrelevant? Furthermore, Owete and Iheanacho argue that orthopedic medicine is one area where traditionalist excel and are preferred to orthodox method.²

Has African Traditional Religion, in this case, not benefited the practitioners, to a very large extent? The objective of this research, therefore, is that African Traditional Religion should not be seen and taken as a phenomenon of antiquity as alleged by foreign religious traditions.

While the religious beliefs are rehearsed in the folklore, they are expressed by songs and minstrelsy, and re-enacted through rituals and festivities. While the philosophy of the religion is uttered in proverbs, its mysteries are analyzed and interpreted in a complex divination system. While the power of the religion is expressed in traditional medicine, magic, occultism and spiritualism, the religion itself is embodied in the priesthood and

other mediums and enshrined in its liturgy and cults. Again Owete and Iheanacho decry the fact that:

Recent developments in the health sector show that traditional medical practitioners are being registered to provide health services in their areas of competence, to complement those provided by orthodox medicine practical. Yet, traditional medicine and medicine men are still looked at with some disdain, and criticized as having some shortcomings and problems³.

A religion that has aided modern medical practice, and frankly resisted, to some extent, the influx of alien religious traditions should not be looked down upon.

Unfortunately, from the inception of Christian missionary activities in Africa, they have their preconceived notion and prejudice against Africa and concluded that the African traditional religion was an inferior religion to theirs. For example, Emile Ludwig, as quoted by Evans Pritchard and cited by Wotogbe-Weneka, derogatorily asserted that:

How can the untutored African conceive God? How could that Be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing.⁴

Another more arrogant statement was credited to one ethnologist, Samuel Baker, as cited in Evans-Pritchard that:

Without any exception, Africans are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship and idolatry, nor is the darkness of their mind enlightened by even a ray of superstition. Their mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms their Punny World.⁵

The Europeans came with the notion that Africans had no idea of God, and that it was their God-given duty to introduce the idea of God and religion to the people.

Although as earlier indicated, the missionaries, tried as much as possible, to wish away the religion, but it could not, because the religion is deeply rooted in the African Culture. The religion indeed has contributed immensely to the development of the various cultures in Africa, and not much has been recorded concerning this development. This is indeed a problem to the authors, and for this reason the authors have decided to document more of such contributions of the religion to contemporary Africa. Hence, by the phenomenology of religion approach, the article seeks to document and bring to the fore the unique ways that African Traditional Religion has contributed to the Development of Contemporary African, especially in the parlances of morality, ethics, traditional medicine, security or social control, preservation of African culture, African History and Arts, among others.

The Nomenclature of African Traditional Religion

The authors' view of the nomenclature of African Traditional Religion appears to be different, for the purpose of this research, from what is in vogue. Although some scholars have described Africa's religious tradition in a plural form, in its varied expressions in the sub-Sahara regions; the fact remains, that its holistic effect on the development of Africa is the crux of this study. Religion, in a nutshell, has always been a quest for the ultimate, whatever that ultimate may be, and since man is a religious being, he cannot but practise his religion anywhere, anyhow. Moreover, the core of religion is the experience of, and the aspiration for, the holy. So the motive behind all religious behavior is the yearning for, and

the experience of, transcendental meaning. It is on this note that Kayode cites the religious tendencies in man:

Any human being who can love ..., reflect, express, fear, appreciate, be depressed, be happy, by all means possesses the ingredients of religion.⁶

So, then, the Traditional African people are deeply religious in all their ramifications. This varied, African religious consciousness could be seen in their beliefs, practices, festivals of ceremonies, religious symbols, values of morals and even their religious medium. Thus, there can be no two or three religions for the African continent, except in various regional expressions. The idea is that Africans have a single religion but with various practices. In other words, there are areas of common grounds – the principle of religion is the same for any given African community, but in practice they differ because of their understanding of the nature around them. In the first place, the nature of African Traditional Religion is quite peculiar in that it is a combination of unity and extreme diversity. Thus, the term, UNICITY of religion, is depicting the singular nature of African traditional religion because of the similarities in their religious systems, the concepts, structures and functions of cults, the wide diffusion of divinities, divination process and ideas. One of the areas of unity in all of the various aspects of African religions is the use of visible symbols as intermediaries to the Supreme God who is wholly other. Another source of similarity in African religion is its effect in the use of rituals and sacrifices. These are the few points, among others, that present it as an impactful religion, and not religions in the plural sense.

African Traditional Religion: A Pre-Christian/Islamic Phenomenon

The origin and history of African Traditional Religion is as old as the continent itself, one would say. This is because the culture and life style of the people assume the dimension of a religion. Although the religion of Africa is not documented but oral in its nature, and handed down from generation to generation, it has a progressive movement and therefore, African Traditional Religion is contemporary. Ajayi and Ayandele further enunciated this point:

That the indigenous religion of Africans is called “traditional” is given full explanation by Awolalu when he says: “When we speak of African traditional religion, we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generations to Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it.”⁷

People had thought of the fading away of African Traditional Religion with the coming of the colonial powers and missionary endeavors; but the reverse has been the case. It is to this fact that Ajayi and Ayandele added:

However by the turn of the century it had become clear to a group of missionaries and educated Africans that African Traditional Religion was a determined foe that could not be wished away and that a grave error had been committed by missionaries who did not seek to understand this religion before pronouncing its obituary⁸

Authors are beginning to realize the fact that African Traditional Religion is a valid system of belief for pre-Christian Africa. According to history, Africa's first contact with the Islamic religion was in about 7th Century A.D. while that of Christianity was about 1st Century A.D. These two religions came into Africa to find an already existing indigenous religion in the continent. Hence Ajayi and Ayandele have rightly said:

As of now, no one has attempted a history of West African Religion. No one knows when West African societies first began to have a perception of the supreme God. Was this before or after the rise of the pantheon of divinities?⁹

In essence, then, African Traditional Religion should be seen as an elder by both Christian and Islamic religions. This point has to be driven home, that before Islam and Christianity made inroads into Africa, African traditional religion had already saturated every aspect of the life of West Africans; and to this day forms the bedrock of the moral and aesthetic values to most Africans. The Traditional religion is, therefore, a precursor to alien Christianity and Islam.

The Utilitarian and Ritualistic Nature of African Traditional Religion

The utilitarian nature of African Traditional Religion is another milestone in the attempt of proving its worth to cotemporary Africa. Rather than communion with the gods, the meeting of existing need is paramount to the African. The African traditional religion appears best in solving these existential problems of man. The practices of traditional religion were effective with our forefathers and so cannot be obsolete to our present predicaments. John S. Mbiti gives the basis to this argument:

But religion just have a greater role to play in modern Africa than simply supplying new myths or revising old ones ... it should and can provide tools and inspiration to the man of Africa to think afresh the fundamental issues of his life which matter most, and to find both meaning and security in that life.¹⁰

By the above citation one can see the utilitarian nature of African religion. The Africans are ready to cross-carpet to any religion that ameliorates hardships while at the same time abandoning any religion that fails to meet the status quo of the time. African Traditional Religion, of all the religions of the world, measures up to these existential problems of the African, and so have a right to live. Mbiti addresses the utilitarian purpose of African traditional religion as an instant religion by this clarification:

Both educated and village... people resort more to their traditional methods of seeking help in such (crisis) moments, like magical practices, divination, contact with the living dead and the performance of appropriate ceremonies and rituals.¹¹

A very recent event which occurred in Port Harcourt, in the Rivers State of Nigeria, validates the point. A situation whereby forcible death came upon innocent lives of both students and teachers, by the wreckage of an uncompleted story building is the reference. Who, then, can have the audacity to nullify the integral place of traditional religion in contemporary Africa? The front page of Sunday Champion with an article titled 'Students' Apparitions Haunt Port Harcourt residents' is the case in point:

However, to keep the ghosts of the dead at rest, the elders of Oro-Obaziolu Community have directed a one-day mourning for the dead students. They have also fenced the accident scene with palm fronds, while libations are poured periodically for the peaceful rest of the spirit of the dead.¹²

The above citation vindicates the fact that elements of African traditional religion are practised in the 20th century and has been quite effective, to some extent, in that no religion, apart from Christianity, has attempted to fill up that gap.

Another important proof of the relevance of African traditional religion to contemporary African is located in the pragmatic or ritualistic nature of African religion. African Traditional Religion is both a religion of salvation, as is the case of westernized Christianity, and also a religion of structure. Africans accentuate orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. Though the religion of salvation, as depicted by Zuesse, has to do with concentration on internal process of subjective thought – a situation wherein the outside world becomes a distraction (abstract meditation/non-ritualistic); whereas the religion of salvation and structure has to do with the entire world of events. It is an emphasis on the concrete and transforms it into a symbol (Ritualistic in nature). Hence, the religion of salvation and structure becomes more complex, since it involves rituals, than the religion of salvation alone. The pragmatic nature of African Traditional Religion, in its ritualistic intent is exposed in the book, *Ritual Cosmos*, as follows:

Ritual, that is to say, is spiritually more profound than any theology; it accomplishes more for those who participate in it than any number of jaded anti-ritualistic modern connoisseurs of the ‘occult’. Yet ritual is not immediately universalistic or profound. It deals with very specific realities that are not transportable into our living room for our casual inspection.¹³

Ritual is, most often, produced by stress, ill health, and death in order to strike a balance between utopia and nothingness. Ritual baptizes us into the process of becoming, thus compelling the recognition of our frail body upon us. In Zuesse own words,

Ritual and the scientific attitude are poles apart. The one urges and even forces us into an acceptance of our ‘built-in’ limitations, the other receives all its inspiration from our desire to destroy those limitation.¹⁴

Not only does ritual advocate the limit and humiliation of bodies but also that limited bodies are sanctified part of divine order. So then, ritual, having to do with the concrete, could have a salvific value on a more practical term because it entails activities that are familiar and intimate, resulting into the use of the body strongly and emotionally. One can, then, appreciate the unique role of African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Africa.

The Contributions of African Traditional Religion to the Development of Contemporary Africa.

The distinctive and conspicuous role of African Traditional Religion in contemporary society cannot be over emphasized. In terms of ethical or moral values, African Traditional Religion will have no rival in the institution of its shrine, as a tribunal of justice. The pouring of libation, the initiation ceremonies and rites of passage, traditional prayers and

incantations all have the idea of justice as their basis. It is so unique that any attempt to abandon the holistic nature of traditional justice will wreck the entire system. Goeffrey Parinder subscribes to this notion, when he said

the old god and ancestors have been so closely entwined with moral sanctions that the decline of old cults might be disastrous.¹⁵

The shrine, again, as a tribunal of justice, is a religious, social and sometimes political institution that wheels the community after the desire of the gods. The activities connected with the shrine: swearing, ethical stability, declaration of innocence, focus of celebration, appeasement, peace and order etc, all have socio-religious bearing and, therefore, prevents the norms of the African society from indiscriminate violation.

Furthermore, the shrines of African traditional religion are tribunal of justice because of its impact in the present social system. It is the basis for horizontal fellowship; it has a grip upon the mentality of the people, hence anything ratified before the leading shrine holdsway. The shrine is symbolic and significant in that it holds the village together. It has a very high sense of moral justice. So, then, the ethical dimension of the African Traditional Religion is enormous since the shrine was never a symbol of a dead, but practical religion.

Consequently, African Traditional Religion is a force to be reckoned with in terms of academics. Universities both within and outside Africa, now have African Traditional Religion in their religious studies department. Today there are renowned scholars in the field of the traditional religions of Africa. Indeed some of the ancestors' and peoples' intellect far more superseded and, sometimes contradicted, that of some known scientific proficiencies. To sum it up, Idowu has this to say:

African Traditional Religion is finding its way into the curriculum of every higher institution of learning throughout the world... doctoral thesis are being written and accepted on the subject almost throughout the world.¹⁶

To be precise, some of the issues raised by traditional religion are yet to be answered, and this would, once again, show the continuity of such a transfused religion as that of the Africans. Though in the words of Idowu "Some academic soothsayers have assumed categorically that African Traditional religion is on the decline and that it is only a matter of time before it would be stamped out, altogether, the religion is still alive.

Every African may wish to be regarded as connected with one or the other of the two religions, that is Islam and Christianity",¹⁷

Most Africans are, at heart, still attached to their own indigenous beliefs, etc and Mbiti reiterates the point:

This type of religion is best injected in the homes, and perhaps in the schools as well, for these are the background areas which are more influential in shaping the total image of the individual... such religion need not be articulated in a uniform creed... it needs no formal advocates... nor even buildings and priests. It is in the ideals, teachings, standards, principles, ethics and experiences of the institutionalized religions... that this transfused religion makes an impact on individuals and society.¹⁸

Another Parlance where African Traditional Religion is idiosyncratically distinguished is in the Medical or Healing area. In most African Societies, diviners who are devotees and practitioners of African Traditional Religion are the medicine men, and major illnesses and troubles are usually regarded, treated and explained by these cultic officiants as religious experiences. Like Idowu suggests, “Traditional Religion is regarded as the final succor by most Africans when we talk in the terms of personal matters in relations to the passages of life and the crisis of life”¹⁹. For example, in hospitals people who, on admission, have declared themselves Christians and indeed are practicing Christians have medicine prepared in the traditional way smuggled into them, at least, that is more effective in that it is consecrated medicine with the touch of the divine healer, in contrast to the European’s mere colored water or mere pills.

Furthermore, while analyzing African Traditional Religion and medicine in Africa, Jegede suggested that “Before the introduction of Western medical Science, traditional religion was used in the diagnosis, treatment and management of Bio/Psycho/Social disorders and illnesses. Herbal preparations, rituals and incantations, as reflected in the Ifa verses (Odu), provided effective therapy...”²⁰. Undoubtedly, modern medicine cannot solve all health problems, especially those which are spiritual in origin. In such cases, the advice given is *E.Lotowo ile boo Co* (use the traditional method) modern medical doctors resort to this reform system, when Orthodox medicine fails to cure an illness especially when the illness defies diagnosis. It has been noticed in matters concerning providence, healing and general well-being, most Africans still look up to their own religion and culture as the way out.

African Traditional Religion and Social facts of Development in Africa

In the first place, there is not imposition of belief and conviction in African Traditional Religion and culture in Africa. Rather people are born into the system. People acknowledged and respected the values and the belief system of their neighbors, a situation which enhance co-existence and stability of African societies and ethnic groups. The deities and shrines that are used for oath taking also serve as means of social contact, and as centre for pilgrimage, where people meet and exchange cultural values, friendship, intercultural Communication and share various social benefits that are necessary for social development in Africa.

Priests in African Traditional Religion, medicine men and other religious functionaries facilitate and promote development. Priests and medicine men aid social development as custodians of cherished traditions of immemorial heritage. Traditional architecture and engineering which are oriented in the people’s world-view and religious precepts help in construction ideas and structure of roads, houses, bridges, high ways and all the infrastructural needs of the society, towards meeting needs, and adaptation to the time. African traditional midwives are custodians and forerunners of medical care of women even as modern orthodox approach to childbirth is eulogized. Traditional birth attendants are still providing essential services to pregnant women, and others with gynecological-related cases. It is for the above reason that Gabriel “calls on Nigerian Government to

encourage traditional medicine in the country as they are already looking to that direction”²¹.

It is encouraging to note that individual Africans and governments, including the Federal Government of Nigeria, are beginning to realize the important roles that healers in the traditional religion, that is medicine men diviners and traditional midwives, can play in our society. In the area of health delivery services, they are already dialoguing, to do something about it. In a rather illuminating article, “The Case for Spiritual Healing, “Dr. J. E. Adetaro, himself a medical practitioner and one time Federal Commissioner for Health advocated” further, and spotlighted the work which was being done by J. O Mume, G. N. Okunza and Chief J. O. Lambo.

As a matter of fact, the Federal Government of Nigeria has established a national committee on Traditional Medicine and the Ogun State Government, too, is reported to have given traditional healers official recognition. Lateef Jakande, a onetime governor of Lagos state, even established the Board for Traditional Medicine. In the address he delivered during the inauguration in April 1980, he indicated that 60% of babies born in Lagos State are delivered outside hospitals and maternity homes”. Akama emphasized that “most of these were delivered by traditional doctors or midwives, who are adherents of African Traditional Religion”²². The World Health Assembly (W.H.A) also has officially recognized the incorporation of Traditional medicine into the Health Care delivery system for a fuller realization of good health for all. “The Alma Ata Conference on Primary Health Care, also recommended that government should encourage research into traditional medicine with a view to standardizing and integrating it into modern medicine, as heralded by Jegede”²³. There are several aspects of the African Traditional religion that are of benefit to mankind.

African mysteries are also another variable in human existence, because it has made some contributions to the wonders of the world. African mystics have posed challenges to the people to acknowledge and know more about the cosmos; hence, the desire to possess charms and magic in every aspect of human life. African Traditional Religion and its cultic functionaries have laid foundation for the people’s meaningful existence in the universe. The primacy of the land had led to its sacredness, as on object of worship and reverence.

Indeed, the life of Africans, as it were, are enmeshed in their indigenous religious conceptions, interpretations, prescriptions, and guided projections from pregnancy and formation of the feutus to death and burial. African Traditional Religion through its kinship structures, rituals of passage and initiations, influence the character and personality formation of the young, for adaptation and conformity with shared norms and values of their societies and various groups. This is how the general African personality and the specific cultural identity of the ethnic groups are formed in the individual. This act of African Traditional Religion can be said to have in no small measure led to the development of concepts in Africa.

The tourism potency of African states, especially in West Africa and Nigeria in particular, is embedded in the traditional religious practices and cultural heritage. Religious artifacts, practices and symbols, such as the *Opongi* masks and masquerades, among the Kalabari, in Rivers state; the *Nwontam* masquerade of Bonny, the *Okonko* war dance of the Ohafia in Abia State; the *Amadioha Ozuzu* shrine and *Ogbudu* Ala-Orwu in Etche, Rivers State; the *Uge "Adiafa"* and the *Obunemu* Epie New Yam Festivals of the Atissa and Epie Clans in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State and several other festivals that adorn the various seasons of the year are veritable tourism resources. There is also the *Gelede*, and *Oshun* Oshogbo sacred grove and festival in Oshun State, the *Eti Lake* fishing festival of Sabgria and the Amassoma Siegbein Fishing Festival, the *Atilogwu* Dance of the Igbo people are some other religious and cultural oriented tourism products. Such cultural tourism resources have equally boosted the socio-economic image and rising political profile of West African and African Countries in the international scene. In Nigeria, for instance, "UNESCO has enlisted some of the traditional religious heritage as international centre of tourism, for mankind"²⁴, as spotlighted by Owete and Iheanacho.

African Traditional Religion as a Foundation for Sustainable Development in Africa

A study of African Traditional Religion and culture is a necessary reflection on the traditions of the past, useful for articulating enabling and sustainable conditions for change and development in Africa. This could be a means of establishing relationship between the past and the present. Salim, makes it clear that "culture and tradition on the one hand, and modernity and technology, on the other hand, are compatible"²⁵. This is the experience of Japan, where there is socio-economic development, alongside the harmony that exists within their beliefs and cultural values. Given that Africa is proud of its religion and various cultural heritage, it can therefore, not afford to replace its cultural values with some other world culture. Bridging the gap between the borrowed technologies of other continent and the indigenous technologies, Awonu opines that:

The bridge must be constructed with, well grounded notions of function, religious and moral to and the social and communal material nature and function of all productive enterprises.²⁶

Such strategy will afford deeper understanding of the past and present day realities. "Traditional Society has been usually considered as the starting point of the process of modernization and therefore seen as a fixed and stable system, as a society in equilibrium"²⁷: as heralded by Munoz. Simply put, we cannot plan sustainable development programs in Africa without recourse to its traditional religion and culture.

Undoubtedly, Africa Traditional Religion has compelled alien religious traditions with the fact of contextualization. The entire thesis of Byang Khato's Theological Pitfalls in Africa, buttresses the objective of this research. Byang Kato said that,

It is comforting to note that Mbiti admits the concept of future resurrection as the Christian hope which the African needs... [hence, he argues that] this is entirely absent in African religiosity, however, rich and strong it might otherwise be.²⁸

The *Sitz im Leben* of Africa is such that Christianity or any other religion will not thrive without taking into consideration its immediate environment. African Traditional Religion is having an imposing context that is irresistible.

This is the stress area of Allison, who said that ‘contextualization has been seen to be the act of communicating the gospel in a way that it is relevant to the people in any given context’.²⁹

In essence, African traditional Religion has succeeded in remaining relevant to its context in Africa, and is coercing alien religious traditions to follow suit. The religious tradition of Africans has an indomitable place in its continent especially in the trado-medical sphere, and will continue to be relevant to its people, at all times, otherwise, it will cease to be the culture of the peoples of Africa.

The Place of Traditional Medicine in Africa Conceptualization

Generally, medicine is the study, and treatment of diseases and injuries. It can be in substance. In liquid or tablet, that can be swallowed or inserted into the body in order to cure an illness. It can also be inform of some other objects and processes, for the treatment of ailments. With reference to the Native Americans, Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary defined medicine to mean any object, spell or rite that is supposed to have natural or supernatural powers as a remedy that may be preventive or curative.

Traditional medicine is a cardinal aspect of Religion in African traditional societies. The paradigm of medicine in this section of study focuses at in its analysis. It has different approaches, such as the use of ritual, herb and other medicinal substances. Parrinder says “ it covers both natural healing agencies such as leaves, roots; and the invocation f ritual or spiritual influences that are thought to be associated with them”³⁰.

The practice of traditional medicine in African is directed at healing or curing diseases, or changing the condition of the person desirous of it. Against this backdrop, medicine in the general African worldview include everything that can be used to heal, kill, to possess power, health, fertility, personality, to maintain order or cause disorder. That is, medicine consists of both drugs for curing and preventing diseases, as well as objects with ritual effects.

It involves not only leaves and roots and their likes; but it extends to magic and spiritual influence. Any power under control, or known to be controllable, and is directed towards achieving certain result(s) becomes an embodiment and art of medicine. Any technique and process used to attract and control such power is the making of medicine, and the man or woman who makes the medicine is called medicine man r woman.

Generally there are different types of medicine in African religion and culture. Medicine and medical practice in traditional societies of Africa can be classified into two main categories of good and bad medicine or sorcery. Under good medicine, we have productive medicine- which include medicine for economic prosperity, love medicine, medicine for wisdom and intelligence, medicine for control of rain etc. Therapeutic medicine is another aspect of good medicine- it includes substances and processes used to cure diseases and drive away evil forces that are inimical to human wellbeing. Such category of medicine include, medicine for stomach ache, medicine for cure of venereal disease, medicine to keep a dying man awake, medicine to postpone death, medicine to

cure mental sickness and medicine to remove or neutralize poison. Protective medicine is another type of good medicine. This is the group of medicine which aims at preventing the menace of evil forces and warding off the destructive act of sorcery, and sorcerers in the society. Some of the products of such aspect of medicine include those made for the prevention of poison, antidote for destructive medicine, medicine, for premonition, medicine to avert evil forces, medicine for cutlass and knife protection, medicine against gunshot etc. The third category of traditional medicine is the destructive type. Such medicine is evil and destructive of people and properties, disruption of people's harmony, home, relationship and business. Examples of medicine in this group, include medicine for 'shooting poison', 'hit and fall medicine,' medicine to cause madness, medicine to disunite and scatter household, and kinship ties, medicine to prevent one's progress, medicine to stop a woman childbirth, medicine to cause accident, medicine to make somebody useless, medicine to kill and take live,³¹ etc as indicated by Owete & Iheanacho. However our attention is going to be focused on the good aspect of African traditional medicine.

Medicine and Holistic Healing in Africa

Healing is a part of the complex religious attempt by Africans to bring the spiritual and physical aspects of the universe, as well as man who lives in it, into a harmonious unity and wholeness. Wholeness is, therefore, the underlying focus of African medicine, while healing is a cardinal African Traditional religious practice. This is against the background of African cosmologists' world view affirming that life must be kept free from problems, such as ill health and obstacles, which hinder the fulfillment of desired goals. Among the unfriendly agents that threaten life here on earth is illness. Sickness is an enemy which Africans try to fight, avoid and eradicate. For the Africans, sickness is a diminution of life—a threat posed to life, hence healing is an activity second only to that of giving live. Petition for healing and general wellbeing is probably the most frequent and constant subject of African peoples' prayer.

A comprehensive understanding of human health includes the greatest possible harmony of all man's faculties and energies. True health is made manifest in the self actualization of that level of freedom which nourish and guide human potentials and resources for human vocations' fulfillment³² as upheld by Harring. Thus, in sickness, Africans perceive that the affected person's general worldview, ethical values, self-conception and perception of neighbors and various group members are affected. It is not only a case of physical weakness, but a spiritual breakdown, and social pathology. This is why the rudimentary approach of medicine men in Africa is to trace and attack' the cause of the ailment, before intensive medication is administered.

Scholars like Eriunosho-1978, Oyebola -1980 and Oke-1994 have identified three major causes of disease and ailment in traditional African societies as natural causes associated with human cravings, nutrition and environmental factors and supernatural causes; for example the wrath and attack of spirit forces, and sorcerers who manipulate powers negatively against others; mystical causes-sickness causing factors such as neglect of ancestral duties, braking of taboo and false oath. A close attention at the causes show that there is so significant distinction between supernatural and mystical causes. And, in all, both causes intersect in one way or the other.

Against the backdrop of the intersecting factors of sickness causation, healing process stretch from one dimension of life to another-based on the relationship between the supersensible world, and the physical world of man. Both worlds must function in harmony, hence the human being is at the centre of the universe.

For the African, the entire world is one fluid, coherent unit in which spirits, plants, animals, the elements, the dead and human beings interact. Hence Udechukwu says there is a thin line between any two section of reality,... man strives at all times to maintain a harmonious relationship with all the forces that impinge on his life and being... wooing of benevolent forces and the keeping in check of malevolent ones³³.

Therefore, as earlier indicated, African medicine and healing, diagnostic searchlight is focused at all aspects of life. Healing process involves the whole man- his bodily ailment and needs, his spiritual problem and its restitution his social problems, and the jural obligation of his kinship and all relationship networks. African healing is aimed at bringing all these into equilibrium and stability. Only when this is achieved is the African, *ipso facto* an African man conceived to be healed and sound in health.

Medicine Men and Traditional Practice

In furtherance of the definition of medicine men, we must emphasize that they are not ‘fetish doctors’ or ‘diabolic personae’. They must be understood from the prism of their vocation, position, and function in society. The medicine man, Parrinder upholds, is a kind of scientist, in that he seeks to discover and use the laws of the universe, not only of inanimate nature but also spiritual forces³⁴.

The background of the vocation is the belief that there are inherent and latent power in natural processes and phenomena; animals, plants, natural features and objects in the world. Through special knowledge and skill, the medicine man organizes items, materials in solemn mood and speeches, towards manipulation of forces for the desired result in respect of health, or to determine any human desire. Owete confirms that on this understanding the medicine man prepares and administers different types of medicine, according to his clients’ health problems and holistic wellbeing³⁵.

The practice of medicine is a vocation which is acquired through calling and or training. One can be called into the profession by a deity, an ancestor, or a benevolent spirit. In such cases, the spirit force infuses the knowledge of medicine into his beneficiary to practice and excel in the profession. Some medicine men attain knowledge of their vocation and practice through vision, or through falling into mysterious sickness. The experience of which is a luminal state- a transformatory period, from ordinary life, to acquisition of sight and knowledge of medicine. Wotogbe has it that this is one way water goddess empower her votaries with the knowledge of medicine.³⁶ Recovering from the sickness, see the beneficiary emerge as a medicine expert.

Some medicine men acquire their skill as lineage heritage. In such case, a successful medicine man gradually transfer his lineage medicine knowledge and instruments to the next inheritor in the kinship group, in most cases the inheritor is one of the medicine man’s children.

Functionally, medicine men are regarded as the watch dog of society, in issues concerning health and wellbeing-prevention and cure of sickness, disease and misfortunes,

which impinge on the life of the individual, and or community. Their functions also range from treatment of minor ailments like headache, with herbs, to the complex problem of driving away witches, exorcising evil spirits, detection of mysteries, uncovering crimes protection from dangers and charm for fortune, removal of curses, exhuming evil charms buried in the ground, performance of rituals, sacrifice and offerings to appease the god or gods for offence, or to thank them for good deeds to the individual or group. Medicine men prescribe cure which may include the observance of taboo. Sometimes, they function as priests and leaders in religious matters- as in certain sacrifice and rituals, and as diviners to unravel mysteries. They also perform sorcery. Medicine men function as counselors to the people- deriving their potency from the skill of ‘seeing’ and tapping knowledge from the supernatural world. Hence, they are common channels to the supernatural world of power. They also function as prophetic voices to the society. They penetrate the supersensible world. Based on their findings of the state of things, in relation to the living and the vicissitude of things in universe, they censor, interpret and relate the implications to the people. In some African communities, medicine men are prominent members of the ruling class. Socially the vocation of medicine enhance one’s ranking in the stratification of his traditional community-hence it is an occupational status, that is prestigious, powerful and wealth attracting.

Owete and Iheanacho³⁷ confirm that

Aspects of Traditional Medicine Practice in Africa include

- i. General Medicine Men;
- ii. Diviners;
- iii. Psychiatrists;
- iv. Bone Setters; and
- v. Traditional Birth Attendants;

Divination, Medicine and Healing

Divination is a perspective of medicine and healing in African societies. The encyclopedia of world religions has it that “ it is the practice of determining the hidden significance or cause of events by various natural, psychological and other techniques...” the techniques of divination enable humans to have insight and knowledge of the future, or about things that may be mysterious or hidden. Following its divine root, divination relates to the supersensible world. It is a sight into the supersensible world, aimed at obtaining information about things in the future, or otherwise concealed from ordinary human perception and comprehension. Owete & Iheanacho, again said “the diviner use his skill to tap information from the supernatural world, and relate them to human affairs”³⁹.

Divination forms a most important aspect of healing techniques in African healthcare system. The spectacular thing about the divinatory method is that it is a spiritual means of healing.

Thus, African traditional medicine tries to strike a harmony between the patient and his environment. This is based on the cosmic understanding of the universe. Man and every aspect of this universe are inextricable linked and these coupled with moral though constitute man’s positive relationship with this world. Medicine is, therefore, aligned with morality and whenever one experiences disease and unfortunate circumstance, it is believed

that the patient has disobeyed or caused dis-equilibrium through his conduct in the society and in life. Again, there are specializations or division of labor among the practitioners. No medical officer takes it upon himself to do curative practice except where he doubles as a diviner. Otherwise, there are those who are knowledgeable in herbs and drugs there are also orthopedic treatment of cetera. According to the herb specialists, whenever they are in the bush or forest in search of herbal elements, a communication based on harmonious existence goes on between them and the plant kingdom. The plants are capable of revealing their curative contents and abilities which the medical officer (Babalawo's, Dibia's or Oyonabu's) are able to understand. They also know the time of the day, when it is in accordance with nature's planning, to take out these plants and herbs. According to them, the early morning or evening are the time when the spirits, with all their powers are present, symbolizing when the plants are in their active potencies and abilities. While tablets and drugs used by Western Orthodox Doctors life by killing other cells in the body, plants and other traditional physical treatment agents are totally healthy and living tissues which strengthen the body without destroying any organ or tissue.

This African Healthcare philosophy explaining the nature of disease and cure is in line with the teachings of Hippocrates who is regarded as the father of modern western medicine. In his writings and treatment, the patient is seen as a psychometric and spiritual unity dependent on the social and physical environment.

Attention therefore was not restricted to the physical symptoms alone but, as we have argued, covers the entire environment and nature of the patient including this world view. Thus, African healthcare practice is equally in line with the injunction by Samuel Hahnemann the father of Homeopathy as cited by Ekwealo that "a single Symptom is no more the whole disease than a single foot is a whole man," hence he says, "ask not what kind of illness the Patient has, ask what kind of patient has the illness."⁴⁰

All these are in defense of Holistic medicine and which form the foundations of African traditional healthcare system in recent times; receiving greater attention. In a lecture given in Montreal, Canada in 1984, British M. P. then, Dr. David Owen called for a return to Holistic medicine.

Medicine men as earlier indicated in Africa use various forms of divination to unravel, and diagnose their clients. Through such device the medicine man is guided by the best way of solving the clients problem. From his study of primitive religions, Collins, identified ten basic ways of divination, as enumerated:

1. Through dreams
2. Presentiments
3. Body actions
4. Ordeals
5. Spirit possession
6. Necromancy
7. Animal types
8. Mechanical technique
9. Nature divination
10. Sundry ways of divination technique^{41/}

Medicine and Taboo

Taboo is of Polynesian origin-meaning “prohibition for an action or the use of an object based on ritualistic distinctions as being either sacred and consecrated or dangerous, unclean, and accursed” according to (Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of World Religions, 1999: such prohibitions are obtainable in all societies, and more so, in Africa, and its traditional medicine practice.

In the traditional medical practice of Africa, prescriptions are accompanied by certain regulations and prohibitions, to guard against antidote and conditions capable of reducing, paralyzing or even neutralizing the efficacy of a specific medicine. Some of such medical taboos can be dietary restrictions, communication or contact with people, restriction to certain places or weather condition like rain, exposure to moon or sunlight etc. it could be avoidance of certain human beings, and or biological conditions, like the pregnant, the menstruating, the deformed, the blind lame etc. medicine taboos in Africa are as many as there are medicine men and medicine for different purposes. Owete and Iheanacho, say violation of a medical taboo or spell may not only affect the effectiveness of the medicine, but may be counter-productive, dangerous and disastrous to the careless handler, and or the client.⁴²

The value of Traditional Medicine in Africa

With scientific strides, in orthodox medicine, certain traditional conceptions and methods of healing are giving way to modern medical institutions. In spite of the advance in orthodox medicine, traditional medicine still flourish, making impact in health and general wellbeing of Africans. Even, while receiving orthodox medicine treatments, under professional medical personnel, the African patient still seek the help of a traditional medicine man, in addition. This ambivalence, partly account for the persistence of traditional medicine. Many ailments and diseases in modern times can be healed either with the orthodox or traditional medicine. In such cases it is a matter of choice, preference, conviction and availability.

On the other hand, there are ailments and sicknesses that modern medical institutions and personnel cannot handle, hence they are ignorant of their causation and diagnosis. Idowu underscores this reason and recourse, for the survival of traditional medicine, noting that, “in strictly personal matters relating to the passage of life and the crisis of life, African traditional religion is regarded as the final succor by most Africans’.⁴³ Contrary to the process of health care delivery in orthodox medical practice, the traditional medicine has the feeling for, and holistic approach to healing and health. The family, kinsmen and community, collectively make the sick believe that they care for his speedy healing, recovery and reintegration into his groups and society. There is recourse, and prayers for the sick to get healed and resume his proper social positions. These are part of traditional healing desires. When an average African goes to hospital, he feels being uprooted from the web of communal living, and sympathetic nurture and care.

Another factor for the flourish of traditional medicine in recent time is economy. Medicine is a lucrative occupation, especially when the medicine man has proved his competence and expertise in certain life threatening ailments and malady. For this reason,

many Africans still take up the vocation and job. Comparatively, the cost of obtaining traditional medical services is cheaper than in orthodox medicine. This is why the patronage of traditional medicine is more so in peasant and poor societies; and since those in the poverty index are more in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, the traditional healthcare delivery continues to holdsway.

Conclusion

If African Traditional Religion do offer a basis for ethics and morals, trado-medical healing and economic enhancement, then, the said religious tradition will have contributed something of immense value to contemporary Africa. African Traditional Religion has aided nation-building, in as much as making its adherent loyal to the state and regimes. Also, one even notices the pomp and pageantry with which the palaces of the Obas and Kabiesis are adorned during festive periods because it is assumed, they are the king-gods and have to be treated with utmost reverence. The African Traditional Religion is, therefore, on a continuum apart from Christianity and Islam – the alien friends. In the final analysis, though there may be converts from traditional religion to Christianity and/or Islam, there still remains a powerful minority upholding African Traditional Religion which seems not to be universal because it is tied down to localities. African Traditional Religion occupies a veritable place in contemporary Africa.

It is equally on record that the shrines are tribunals of justice. The pouring of libations, the initiation ceremonies and rites of passage, traditional prayers and incantations inherent in the religion, all have the idea of justice as their basis. The activities associated with the shrine – swearing in, ethical stability, declaration of innocence, focus on celebrations, appeasement, peace and others, all have socio-religious bearing, and by so doing prevent the norms of the African society from atrophy. Traditional Religion has provided succor for medically indigent patients. The myriads of divinatory systems had served as mechanisms for social control in Africa. Its benefits in nature and content are innumerable and so African Tradition Religion thrives on, even to generations yet unborn.

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