

Esan Traditional Medicine: Problems and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Esan Traditional Medicine (ETM) with emphasis on its problems and prospects. The ETM flows together within the network of African traditional heritage. It forms part of African metaphysical belief and an essential element of the people's life since good health and good living is the core expectation of all humans existing on earth. This paper further examines ETM as a phenomenon that revolves round all the people's life and activities. That ETM does not only concern itself with the healing, cure and prevention of diseases and ailments. That it goes beyond the physical to the psychosomatic and spiritual levels. The paper also discusses that in Esan there is medicine for planting, good luck, and so on. Nevertheless the main concern of this treatise is how the response to social change has adversely affected the practice of ETM. Besides, the paper further conveys that deforestation, poor attitude to ETM and traditional practitioners, the death of traditional experts and others form the factors militating against the ETM. To achieve the objectives of this work the researchers adopt the analytical, descriptive and the phenomenological methodology. The researchers submit that if the recommendations made in this paper is appreciated, the ETM will be revamped and it will also boost the application of alternative medicine to make room for good health and peace which is the bottom line for development throughout the world.

Introduction

Considering the importance and unquantifiable functions of the Esan Traditional Medicine (ETM) it is rather sad to notice that it is fading away to oblivion on a grand scale. Several factors are responsible for this decline which this paper shall discuss.

Nevertheless, the new wind of revival blowing in the practice of Alternative medicine throughout the world is giving a hopeful impetus to ETM. Despite the effectiveness of the traditional medicine some people still hold the view that to be civilized is to avoid the ETM and cleave to the use of orthodox medicine.

Furthermore, the paper looks at the prospect of traditional medical system and makes some plausible recommendation.

Esan Traditional Medicine (ETM)

African people like other people of the world have their complete human component and worldview. It is to be noted that before the westerners discovered what they tagged the “dark continent” the impartial universal Supreme Being has through ancient sages developed means of producing and sustaining man on the surface of the earth including Africa. And medicine is one of these means. The English word medicine is called by various names by various people in Africa. For instance the Esan people refer to it as *Ukhumun*. The Akan people of Ghana refer to it as *suman*, while Mende calls it *hale*. The Yoruba call it *oogun*, *egbogi* or *isegun*, the Nupe and Ibo call it *cigbe* and *ogwu* respectively. The Zulu call it *umuthe*(1). It is unequivocal that what has a name must possess a meaning and purpose. Hence medicine possesses a fundamental meaning and purpose among African people.

Dime opined that African Traditional Medicine (ATM) like Western medicine, aims at healing (therapeutic) and preventing (prophylactic) diseases. Thus both types of medicine have the same basic objectives(2).

Having established the fact that ATM exists, the next question is; what is Medicine? Medicine is the art of using the available resources of nature to prevent, treat or cure diseases. It is the art aimed at restoring and preserving health by means of medication. Medicine therefore is both therapeutic and prophylactic (curative and preventive)(3). According to Mume, traditional medicine is the transmission by word of mouth and by example the knowledge

and practice based on customary methods of natural healing or treatment of disease(4)

The definition of Sofowora seems more elucidating, Sofowora defines ATM as the:-

Total combination of knowledge and practice whether explicable or not, used in diagnosing, preventing or eliminating a physical, mental or social disease and which may rely exclusively on past experience and observation handed down from generation to generation verbally or in writing(5).

The Esan traditional medicine (ETM) corroborates the above definition. Although many traditional doctors and healers are not literates, yet the ETM takes care of physical, psychological, psychosomatic and social diseases. This is where the traditional medicine remains relevant in the presence of foreign medicines. For instance *utagba*, *osisioto*, (psychic afflicted gun shoot) are not known to western medicine. It is the indigenous people that know and treat such diseases.

Therefore, medicine to the Esan people is the art of curing and protecting the body, soul, spirit, materials and even the environment. Hence there is medicine for planting, hunting, trading and so on, among the traditional Esan people and African people generally.

Herbalism

Herbalism is the art of collecting, conserving, utilizing and application of plants for the cure and prevention of illness and for the promotion of physical and spiritual wellbeing(6). The person who practices herbalism is called an

herbalist. An herbalist is a man or woman who has a vast knowledge of the use of medicinal plants. He applies the knowledge for self help and to help others. In African communities plants are known to almost everyone as medicine. For example the tree called “*dogoyaro*” is known to almost everyone for the treatment of malaria and dysentery. But an herbalist can put it to more uses for curing of diseases than the ordinary layman.

The funniest and most erroneous thing is that many people associate herbalism and herbalist with “juju” or “idol”, magic, witchcraft or wizard and so on. These derogative appellations are wrong ideas which the western culture has impacted on foreign and indigenous detractors. The fact of the matter is that the above presumption is wrong. Herbalism has a positive enhancement on human and material resources and it is the mainstay of African Traditional Medicine, the Esan inclusive.

ESAN TRDITIONAL MEDICINE: ITS PROBLEMS

There are multi-various factors militating against the traditional medical system of the Esan people among which are:

a. Cultural Invasion

Muraro describes cultural invasion as an action in the field of culture that serves the purpose of conquest and continuing oppression, that (it) implies a narrow view of reality, a static perception of facts and the imposition on others of a certain view of the world. In his words the “superiority” of the invader and the inferiority of the invaded, and the imposition of values

constitute the main element of cultural invasion(7). This is exactly what the African religion, culture and medicine experienced from the white who came in the name of propagating their religion of peace with the bible in the left hand and sword on their right hand. They exploited Africans; everything Africans was regarded badly. The African Religion which is the expression of the people's relationship with the divine was labelled many derogative names like, primitive, animism, paganism heathenism and idolatry(8). Medicine which forms an integral aspect of the African religion was also labelled fetishism, magic, superstition, animism, witchcraft and sorcery(9). For instance, Una MacLean classified "magical" medicine as "irrationality, malpractice, and a mixture of superstition, deliberate deception and ignorance"(10). Scholars like Gelfand called the African medicine man and woman, witch doctors(11). Most of these scholars are missionaries. Consequently, the 'white religion' was half trusted to the people with their western civilization, and this has been affecting the traditional medicine of the Esan people and African as a whole.

The introduction of the foreign religion did a lot of damage to the African Traditional Religion among the Esan people. In the name of evangelism they captured many African people. This help in changing the people's orientation concerning their indigenous beliefs and practices. Many traditional values were rejected and labelled barbaric.

The foreign religions have also encouraged changing of names. Names among the Esan people are mediums of expression of values. For instance

names like Obozele (meaning it is the help herbalist), Aizoboa (Don't disregard herbalist), Oseboh (God is a doctor), Okosun (son of Osun - the divinity of medicine) and the like were said to be devilish. A child given such name will respect the means and purpose of his/her birth. But because the people were given the orientation that the cause of giving them the names have fetish undertone, many people preferred to be called Abednego (servant of idol called nego), Belial (an idol), Thomas (a doubter), Patrick, Bush and so on. These are gross evidence of acceptance of false identity. This according to Dada is cutting away from ones root(12). This creates identity crises which does not only affect the person but his ancestors. The ancestors are the great pillars behind Esan traditional medicine. Their contemptuous treatment had led to the decline of traditional medical system.

The presence of foreign religions has also stamped out the great *iluosun* festival in many Esan communities. Osun is the divinity in charge of medicine. According to Okojie, the god was the embodiment of cunning, the art of healing, magic etc(13). During Osun festival (*iluosun*) the activities include exhibition of various drugs and charms, talent competition, riddle and jokes and stories on how various people use medical plants for various therapeutic and prophylactic fits; hero songs of people who excel in area of various aspects of medical achievement and hunting dirge were also part of the activities. These have gradually faded away into oblivion and have adversely affected Esan traditional Medicine

greatly. Now-a-days young ones have no opportunity to hear, watch and experience from traditional sages.

The missionaries religions with their modern civilization coupled with western medicine prejudicially oppress and thrown traditional medicine into the valley of dismal. These have drawn the course of Esan traditional medical system backward.

b. Technological Advancement.

Due to the orientation given to the African people, the Esan inclusive, through cultural imperialism, they were forced to become passive spectators of the technological advancement that has been happening around them. They were relying on finished goods including drugs of the advanced countries and this has affected the African traditional medicine so much. Africans have woken up from cultural slumber some decade ago but the gap is still widening. Many traditional medical practitioners are faced with the problem of dirty environment and crude utensil for the preparation of medical elements. The western system has long ago developed and preparation of drugs is through modern equipments. The fast growth experience by western medical system through technology on other parts of the world is so great that even majority of the Africans are even thinking that upgrading Africans is like drawing oneself backward but the only consolation is the boost herbal medicine receives in the contemporary Nigerian society and beyond.

Moreover, most shrines which (are custodians of traditional medicine and) communicates the presence of the Divine are being pulled down as result of the construction works going on among the people(14). Moreover people are becoming accustomed to the application of scientific method in solving some human problems. Many hitherto inexplicable diseases are now treated in the hospital. Many things that were formerly attributed to the realm of mystery no longer pose as mysterious because of technological knowledge. In effect, traditional religion has taken second place, and tended to be limited to times of difficulties or distress(15).

c. Attitude towards traditional medicine.

Traditional medicine forms the nucleus of African life. Before the advent of the European colonists and missionaries it was highly regarded without reservation. But it has been subjected to relegation due to the orientation given concerning it by the witness. Everything African was inferior. This also affected traditional medicine which was derogative treated. Akunyili the Director General of Nigeria National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC) commenting on the attitude of herbal medicine said;

Traditional medicine should be encouraged. Unfortunately, for too many years it has been looked down upon in Nigeria because of our attitude that everything coming from the white man's land is better than our own. But that is not correct(16). According to Ogbemor, Esan

traditional medicine is labelled “juju” medicine while the herbalist is Satan incarnate. The fact is that herbalism has nothing to do with Ojuu (the devil)(17).

Most Christian preachers discourage herbalism. They associate it with evil. Hence some Christian attitude toward it is hypocritical. Some confess the use of it (TEM) as a sin. Through foreign indoctrination and acculturation the people’s minds have been poisoned against it. Nonetheless the percentage of people using traditional medicine openly is gradually increasing.

d. Death of Experts in the System.

This also constitute a greater problem to the system in the sense that some rituals and rudiments surrounding effective practice of Traditional medicine are at times not fully communicated to young ones before the custodians died. Unfortunately most traditional gurus who were experts in the use of medicinal plants died without anybody knowing their styles. Hence secrecy as one of the conditions of traditional medicine has led to its declined.

In the researcher’s case, the grand – mother was a renowned traditional gynaecologist in her life time. Her death has killed the talent in the family. The researcher could not gain enough from her as a result of earlier orientation. If she were alive now, alas the opportunity would have been put to a maximum use. Hence the Esan people say *uu ria ebhinlin an*,- “death has destroyed things”

e. Language

Language also has constituted another greater problem to Esan traditional medical practice. Western education has introduced to Nigeria, Esan people inclusive English language as official language. The Africans themselves are contributing to the annihilation of their language. Almost every parent wants their children or wards to speak Queen's English and if the a *esan Owanlen* (Esan good morning sir) greeting by the researcher thus, good morning Obhinnhen (my son). This shows the extent of the dept the English language has eaten into the fabric of the Esan man.

The foreign language is spoken even in the family circle. The inscriptions in our house are written in English. These have in no small measure marred the face value of the golden gift from God. Many Esan children at home and in Diaspora cannot make full complete sentence in the mother tongue. Neither, do they know names of trees, grass, animals and other minerals which constitute Esan medicine in their local names. This has also form a fundamental problem to the researcher since there are some plants, animals and other things which English language cannot express to satisfaction. In the course of research, Chief Agaga, an herbalist mentioned *Udin eleinin*(18) to the researcher which the botanical name of English equivalent has proved difficult to translate.

Moreover, the African traditional Religion owes much to proverbs, stories, legends, axioms and so on. These are best expressed in the

indigenous language. Many parents do not have enough time to share with their children in order to inculcate these virtues due to economic demand of their families. Thus the knowledge of the indigenous language suffers retardation.

Besides, many plants and animals have their mystical names. The traditional medical practitioners have their professional language with which they communicate with plants, animals and the mystical world. Very few are aware of this fact. The more one is conversant with these facts the more one's deeper knowledge in the use of medicinal elements. Moreover there are mystical languages associated with the practice of magic. Since magic, medicine and religion are inevitable related together in Africa in general and Esan in particular, language as a mediums of expressing religion and culture is uncompromisingly essential. Hence the problem of poor language affects the traditional medical practice of the Esan people greatly. This corroborates with the assertion of Dopamu and Awolalu. Dopamu and Awolalu writing concerning the oral nature of ATR, remarks;

Besides, the oral nature of the traditional Religion has contributed to its decline. As we have pointed out, it has no written literature which can be studied, applied and advanced within the comforts of one's homes(19).

f. Illiteracy

This also has affected the practice of traditional medicine among the Esan people in no small measure. The system has no written form before the advent of the foreigners because its practitioners were illiterates.

Consequently many things that would have been put in paper for purposes were only transmitted orally. And it is generally known that orally relayed words are either half delivered or have some added to them in the course. This factor was part of the reason why African traditional Religion suffered redundancy (20) until about some decades ago when it started picking up through scholars in the field.

Many traditional practitioners died with their talents and gifts because they were not literate to put them down for their offspring to discover. This has made some aspect of the traditional medicine to go into oblivion. Illiteracy also accounts for the lack of accurate dosage that the traditional medicine is scandal for.

With all these problems it is opposite to say that the traditional medical system is recuperating from its gasping condition.

g. Deforestation

This is the continuous removal of forest stands (trees) without replacing them²¹. This is brought about by farming, bush burning, over grazing, road construction, industrialization, mining, urbanization(22) etc. The phenomena have not only caused ecological and environmental problem. It has also led to the erosion of herbal elements. Hence most herbalists complain bitterly about it. The place of plants, animals and other minerals found in the forest in herbalism is grossly inestimable. In the past trees are custodians of the

traditional medicine. For instance, the *Unoko Ibamawo of Owu Ewohimi*, and the *utantan* of Inyani of Uromi were centres for attraction for herbalists. The researcher was reliably informed that the *Unoko Ibamawo of Ewohimi* used to give gift to practicing herbalists. This information was given to the researcher by one Peter Owobu of Idumisaba Ewohimi(23). Dime commenting on the importance of forest asserts:

There are many destructive agents the legal and illegal felling of trees for timber building of high ways, clearing of hectares upon hectares of forest land for industrial establishment and farming(24).

These destructive agents have affected the practice of African Traditional Medicine adversely. It should be noted that animals that are dwelling in the forest contribute to the development of traditional medicine. Their components and facieses are used for both therapeutic and prophylactic solutions. Hunters discover new medicinal plants from animals. Animals eat medicinal leaves and bark of trees which are helpful to their bodies in various conditions. For instance the popular bullet proofing decoction (*Ugbobi*) was discovered in the forest as shot animals ran there to drink the water in a stump of tree and vomited or had their bullets pulled out of their bodies(25)

The gradual disappearance of trees, animals and even the forest amounts to the backwardness suffers by the Esan Traditional Medical system. Some important herbs, roots, bark of trees and animal parts can only be bought in Yoruba stalls in some open markets for medicinal use.

The Prospect of Esan Traditional Medicine

The word “prospect” means “an idea of what or will happen”(26). Therefore this aspect of the paper is concerned with constructive speculation through observation made by the researcher. African Traditional Medicine is an essential component of African Traditional Religion (ATR). The world view of the African people is interrelated by one. Even though there are some factors militating against it one cannot raptly say that it will fade away. According to Idowu:

One of two things that has happened to man’s religion in any given situation: modification which be said to have the fate of religion throughout the world, of any religion. There is no religion that has not taken into itself element from other religion and cultures. Influences from other cultures and contacts with other immigrant religion have brought not only change in the complex of religion, but also modification of its tenets. The most particular of religions have not been able to escape this factor: they have been forced by the nature of things to give and take elements to and from even those religions, which they regard as their enemies or rivals(27).

Since religious beliefs of the people inculcate every aspect of the religious heritage, therefore the Esan medical system must resultantly exist. Although

traditional rituals have been influenced, it is only modification that has taken place.

The teaching of traditional religion in African school and colleges is a boost to African religious institution. Students learn about the beliefs and practices of their localities in school and colleges. This is helping some students to appreciate the values in the indigenous religion. The establishment of National college of Alternative medicine (NCAMED) in Lagos Nigeria²² is a realization of great hope in the revival of African unflinching hope for traditional medicine (TM). The recognition Nigeria National Agency for foods and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC) gives to it is an added great hope. Alabede quoting professor Dora Akunyili the Director of NAFDAC said that "Traditional medicine should be encouraged"(28)

Another hope for TM is the world Health Organization (WHO) is also giving attention to it (Traditional medicine)(29)

Another essential hope is that people have renewed interest as they have changed attitude toward TM. The traffic flow of patients patronizing Pax Herbal Home Ewu, Thomas Bone setting home Iruete-Uromi, Omosun Traditional psychiatric centre Ewu to mention but a few is an attestation to the fact that TM is receiving open hand embracement. Concisely, the future of Esan traditional medicine is brighter. Since people are writing on it, many are practicing it while many are patronizing the local product in a very high rate.

Conclusion

The work has shown that the African Traditional medical system followed with other aspects of their religious and cultural worldview inseparably.

In the work, focus is on Esan Traditional medicine as a case study. The purpose is to give an explicit account of the concept and its practice as much as possible. The concept has been clarified and examined from various aspects of its practice. The Esan cosmological worldview is discussed to throw more understanding on the traditional practice.

The researcher discovers that there are factors militating against the practice of ETM. The work throws light to them and shows that these problems can be solve. It further examined the militating factors against the background of providing lasting solution.

The work discussed the prospect of ETM and discovers that its prospect is bright. This is due to change of attitude toward Traditional medicine (TM) locally and internationally. The teaching of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in schools and colleges is also a great hope to the survival of TEM. By way of a logical conclusion the researcher makes the following recommendation:

RECOMMENDATION

The recommendation made in this work includes the followings:

That, more effort should be put in place to teach African Traditional Religion in school, colleges and tertiary institution. More so the aspect of Traditional medicine (TM) should be given adequate attention in order to debunk the erroneous idea that TM is magical, idolatry “juju” and their practitioners are witches, wizards, sorcerers and magicians. Also, Africans should set up schools and colleges with indigenous orientation so that pupils and students who happen to pass through the system will be indoctrinated in African values. This is the major brain behind the advancement of western religion and culture.

Religion in the world today has been greatly revolutionized²⁹. For instance the Christian religion carries the gospel with complexity of western culture, politics, science, technology, medicine and new methods of conquering nature. Hence the foreign religion prepares African psychologically to be more receptive to western culture and lifestyle. African Traditional religion should borrow a leaf from the western style. This will improve the lots of Traditional medical practice locally and internationally.

It is also the recommendation of the researcher that parent should teach their children and wards the indigenous dialect and language. Proverbs, stories, songs and myths that contribute to the solidarity of indigenous cultural practice should be encouraged and relayed to young ones. It is preferable that these should be written down. There should be proper documentations of African values, they should be put in the internet, that is medical practitioners

should try to create website in order to popularize and perpetrate TM in particular and African values in general.

Also the Esan people should write about their traditional heritages including the TM. Forestation should also be seriously encouraged in order to boost TM. In addition, Africans, the Esan people inclusive should cherish the Divine endowment instead of shying away from their heritages. They should promote programmes that can advance and extant them. Rallies, convention, symposiums, festival etc should be put in place to publicize the traditional values. Traditional medical practitioners (TMPs) should come out to abreast the people of the rudiments of their practice. Finally, African people should patronize TMPs without pretence. And TMPs should attend course in educational institution that can broaden the skill of their trade. They should also form association of TMPs so as to encourage the medical system and also form a formidable body to discourage 419 practice in T.M. furthermore, TMPs should express their area of specialization distinctly, to avoid “master know all attitude” which makes the practice of TM ambiguous.

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