African Traditional Medicine and the Problem of Documentation

Magnus A. Aniago

Institute of African Studies University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract: The African Traditional Medicine (ATM) has come a long way coming as early as man found the need to maintain life and preserve life. The survival of African Traditional Medicine after many millennia, amid a more sophisticated and scientific orthodox medicine is a sign that it has something to offer world health. The writer x-rays the methodology, diagnoses, treatments and successes of African Traditional Medicine and discovers the weaknesses of ATM mainly in the area of documentation and scientific evidence. It is the writer’s opinion that if all hands are on deck in solving the above problems of African Traditional Medicine, there will be definite improvement in world medicine and world health.

Key words: ATM • Documentation • Health and Discovery

INTRODUCTION

African Traditional Medicine (ATM) is as old as the Western Orthodox Medicine (WOM) and might have preceded it in Africa since the practice of orthodox medicine is most recent in composition. Though, historical facts revealed that orthodox medicine started in African Egypt; it was overtaken by the western world and so we can talk of Western Orthodox Medicine home coming to Africa. Before, during and after its exile, Africans practiced their traditional medicine and cured at least minor diseases and in some cases, serious ailments that even today defy orthodox treatment. The case of traditional bone setting is an issue at hand. There is presently serious debate on which of Western Orthodox Medicine or Traditional Medicine that manages bone fracture more efficiently. Options could vary as to the expression of opinion on this issue. The variation of opinions as to which of African Traditional Medicine or the Western Orthodox Medicine manages bone fracture more efficiently is a very good indication that something significant is taking place in the realm of African Traditional Medicine (ATM).

This paper, therefore, looked at some aspects of African Traditional Medicine and the evolution of Western Orthodox Medicine through the middle ages. In some areas of its evolution, African Traditional Medicine were compared with Western Orthodox Medical practice. A common root was identified in some of the aspects of evolution of both practices, though Western Orthodox Medicine overtook African Traditional Medicine because of what may be described as the problem of documentation and scientific evidence [1].

African Traditional Medicine Versus Western Orthodox Practice: “Medicine” as a morpheme has various meanings depending on the concept the user wants to elicit. In some sense, “Medicine” is synonymous with drugs or pills or any substance that enhances healing or cures of ailment or disease. Medicine could also be conceptualized as a field of study in the university or medical college. It could also mean the entire process of guiding, healing or administering medicine as in African Traditional Medicine. Medicine could also be regarded as a body of knowledge like one who studied Medicine. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defined medicine as the treatment and study of illnesses and injuries. For this paper, medicine will be regarded as the treatment of all kinds of diseases and ailments. African Traditional Medicine is, therefore, the treatment of diseases using the African traditional method Kimble [2].

Oral reports abound of healing and cures obtained by the use of African Traditional Medicine. These cures range from treatment of burns resulting from fire to bone fractures, acute fever, migraine, gonorrhea, syphilis, hepatitis, stomach obstructions, small pox, chicken pox, infertility, etc. Though, there is no empirical proof of most of these cures, “Common observation” attests to it.
Unlike the Western Orthodox Medicine, the African Traditional Medicine lacks proper documentation and organized chronicle of healing and management of illnesses obtained in this area of medical practice. Many of the breakthroughs recorded in orthodox medicine especially in the Middle Ages were recorded and documented in tandem with advances in the sciences and technology. The 19th, 20th, 21st centuries witnessed majority of these great fits in health delivery.

The question then arises; how have Africans been managing these diseases before the advent of the orthodox medical practice? Definitely, one is obliged to state that if there were no healings and successful management of ailments, little or none would have been left of human beings in Africa. It becomes more pertinent to ask; how many of these cures and disease management are documented and accessible? History of medieval medicine has shown that the practice of orthodox medicine was very much like that of African Traditional Medicine in that superstition and religion were mixed with treatment and healing. However, while progress in orthodox medicine was been penciled down, that of traditional medicine was not.

A lot of superstition is involved in African Traditional Medicine just as was the case with orthodox medieval medicine in England which today is one of the leading giants in medicine and surgery. Unfortunately, while modern orthodox medical practice has since separated medicine from superstition and religion, African Traditional Medicine is deeply embedded with religion and superstition, though some modern herbalists in African Traditional Medical practice can talk of treatment and cure devoid of religion and superstition [3].

The medieval medical practitioners had many views about the causes of illnesses just like in African Traditional Medicine. Collier et al. [4] gave about four causes of illnesses widely accepted in the Middle Ages Medical Practice:

- One source postulates that God is intolerant with the sons of men. As a result of this, he allows plagues, miserable famine, conflicts, wars and other forms of sufferings to arise and uses them to torment the people and so cleans out their sins. Therefore, the people of England were oppressed by the plagues from time to time. Similarly, in African Traditional Medicine some illnesses are believed to be inflicted by deities of whom appeasement needs to be made to have meaningful cure. Such was also the case with Judaism where illness arises as a result of the sin of the individual, his parents or the community [5].

Also, by the pool of Bethsaida, Jesus’ response to the man he healed that had 38 years infirmity is also suggestive of the link between sickness and sin. Jesus told him “go and sin no more that nothing worse may befall you”.

- Guy de Chauliac, a famous doctor of the 14th century had postulated as a possible cause of illness or ailment the interaction/position of the great planets, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars. In African Traditional Medicine, certain illnesses are attributed to certain weather conditions. There is the general belief that psychiatric cases heighten during harmattan and at “Full moon”.

- Collier, Day, Doherty and Marriot identified another possible cause of illness in medieval medicine from a textbook published in 1991. Medieval doctors thought that the body was made up of four humors-earth, fire, water and air. If these humors should get out of balance, you fell ill. In summer, the dry heat would increase the fire so you would sweat and get very hot – you might even become bad tempered. In winter, the damp climate would increase the water in your body. This would make you produce more phlegm and suffer from coughs and colds. In African Traditional Medicine, there is so much description of the structure of the body in relation to ill-health. The causes of most sicknesses that defy application of herbal concoctions often attributed to causes other than the position of the body [6].

- Quoting a textbook published in 1996, Collier, Day, Doherty and Marriot op. cit. said that in the Middle Ages, people thought that worms are connected to illness. When doctors examined the feces of sick people, they often saw worms. In African Traditional Medicine, the presence of worms identified either from the feces or through a kind of disturbance in the stomach or intestine of a patient is mostly taken as an illness or ailment of its own. It is often treated as such – with herbs and mixtures.

In Igbo region of Nigeria, the causes of sicknesses are varied in its traditional life. These causes of illnesses could be grouped into three domains:

Natural Causes: There are certain illnesses the Igbos believe appear to man by fortune or nature. It may be as a result of weather or environmental changes. A man may suddenly develop cold or fever. If “Drugs” are administered and the sickness varnishes, it will be a clear indication that it is of natural occurrence.
Man-made Causes: It is generally believed in Igbo and African Traditional life that there are two kinds of human beings – good men and evil men. The good men relate well with their fellow human beings and wish them well. They use diabolical means to inflict injury and sickness on their victims. Many of the sicknesses that defy cure in African Traditional Medicine are attributed to the machination of such men. Even presently, some accidents either of vehicles or tools are said to be the acts of such men. Many of the mad people along the streets and in the villages are claimed to be victims of evil men.

Divine Cause or Acts of the gods/Spirits: In African Traditional life, God exists, gods and spirits exist too. These have powers greater than those of human beings and can “Make” or “Unmake”. They have the power to build and destroy. They can promote health and inflict human persons with diseases and pestilence. One therefore, has to be in the good books of God or the gods/spirits to continue to enjoy good health and favorable conditions, serious calamity or sickness may befall someone for violating the laws of the gods and indeed the laws of the “Land”. Such calamities and sicknesses do not heal easily as widely believed. Tuberculosis and stroke for example, are widely accepted in Igbo Traditional Medicine to be a vengeance of the gods or the acts of evil men [7].

The Role of the Medicine Man in African Traditional Medicine: The medicine man (“Dibia”, as he is called in Igbo Area of Southern Nigeria) is the great force in African Traditional Medicine. He is seen as the center of solution for all physical and spiritual problems and he wields so much influence that he is feared and respected. Like the priests-physicians who were the early doctors at the inception of orthodox medical practice, the medicine man combines his knowledge of herbs, roots and mixtures for cures with the power of consulting with the spirit world. He is believed to see beyond human vicinity, to find solutions in the spirit world. He has the power to appease the gods and can foresee events. He digs in the spirits to find out the cause of various illnesses and the line of solution. He speaks with authority and his word is almost a law. He wields a lot of psychological influence that can guarantee hope to the dilapidated. His pronouncements can shake a community to its foundation. For every event in the traditional African life, the medicine man is at the center. The medicine man sometimes leads soldiers in big battles and at the same time nursing the wounded. The whole armour of war is hinged on him because; he determines the pace of the battle, the advances and the retreats [8].

The medicine man sometimes admits patients in his house who may require long treatment. His charges are normally moderate because he believes his career is a gift from the gods and powers could be stripped off him if he overcharges for his services. The efficacy and potency of his medicine is influenced by the gods. His method is far from being empirical if compared with modern day orthodox medical practice. That is to say that some of what he does cannot be empirically verified but he believes in the efficacy and power of his actions. He does not believe in documentation or he is ignorant of the need for documentation. For this, his knowledge and “Powers” most often die with him. His greatest act of preservation is teaching one of his sons or daughters some curative “Herbs”. Most often, he is hesitant to reveal even to his closest child access to his most powerful charms and the way of its operation. Most claim that the people of this generation are wicked and if given knowledge to some “traditional herbal/medical/spirit practices”, they would inflict calamity on humanity or in their own words, “destroy things”. However, it should be noted that there are ordinary herbalists in the practice of African Traditional Medicine who do not combine spiritism with medical practice. Presently, some of them put on print their “Wares”. Though, what is on print is too minute compared to the enormity of what is obtainable or riches in African Traditional Medicine (ATM). Documentation and publication are seriously required to preserve the values in African Traditional Medical Practice [9].

Diagnoses, Treatments and Cures in African Traditional Medicine: Sickness is said to be as old as humanity. Once life is given, the need to preserve it arises. The African man has struggled for millennia to preserve this life and to fight sicknesses and infirmities. Here, the role of the medicine man becomes paramount because most often the sick is helpless and needs the “Other” to survive. The African man, like any other human being of any race, hates and dreads sickness and does everything within his reach to make sure he is healthy. The existence and survival of the teeming population in Africa long before the introduction of Western Orthodox Medicine is a confirmation of this fact. Writing on the health problems of Sub-Saharan Africa, Kimble [2] described the African social drama in which he said that sickness has a strong claim to be arch-villain. According to him, it is bad enough
that a man should be ignorant, for this cuts him off from the commerce of other men’s mind. It is worse that a man should be poor, for this condemns him to a life of stint and scheming in which there is no time for dreams and no respite for weariness. But what surely is worst is that a man should be unwell for this prevents his doing anything much about either his poverty or his ignorance.

The presence of the medicine man makes the difference especially when healing takes place. This also applies somehow in the Western Orthodox Medical Practice. The presence and psychology of the medical practitioner and the courage of the patient make the difference especially when there is restoration of health. The role of the traditional medicine man would be better appreciated when one considers the condition of the sick in an average African traditional setting. Kimble op. cit. writes that in tropical Africa, most men, women and children are habitually unwell. Most are sick of more than one disease. He states categorically that left on their own devices, most of the sick have no prospects of ever not being sick. The herbalist or medicine man fills this gap.

Apart from the above, one could also appreciate the role of the traditional African medicine in promoting health and sustaining life when one considers this statement by Kimble [2].

...Nor is it only the matter of the African Suffering from diseases. It is also a matter of his living in a physical, social and psychological environment and on a diet that makes it hard for him to keep well even when he is not actually ill. P.350.

Diagnoses, treatments and cures in African Traditional Medicine (ATM) resemble what was obtainable in the Medieval Orthodox Medical Practice (MOMP). Collier et al. [4] stated that in the medieval medicine, diagnosing a patient was done very differently from the method used by the doctors today. According to them, medieval doctors sometimes checked the pulse of a patient and often studied the patient’s urine. A chart told them what to look for in the urine. Clear urine indicated that the patient’s digestion is good. Black or cloudy urine suggested that it was bad and was taken as a sign of likely death.

In Igbo Area of Nigeria, the medicine man or herbalist can identify some sicknesses and their symptoms. However, the major diagnosis is “igbaafa” (Divination and conjuring with spirits). As stated earlier, any sickness or ailment that defies simple medication calls for a deep diagnosis. This diagnosis is rooted in “Igbaafa”. The “Afa” will reveal the root cause of the sickness and what could be done for cure to be obtained. Most often, “sacrifices” are made to the gods as a kind of appeasement. If the gods are responsible for the sickness, the sacrifice will be to abate their anger. If the gods are not responsible for the sickness, the sacrifice could be toswing them into action, to fight for the sick person and obtain a cure.

The “Afa” could also reveal things to be done or herbs that could be used to restore health. The “afa” could also reveal that sacrifices should be made to the spirits of some dead ancestors who are demanding such. Through the “afa”, demand may be made that little children should be gathered and gifts items offered them including food. The efficacy of such diagnoses cannot be verified empirically when compared with modern orthodox medical diagnoses.

With regards to treatment and cure in African Traditional Medicine, a look at the treatment of everyday illness in medieval orthodox medicine would show much similarity which may be a sign that African Traditional Medicine is still in the process of evolution. Collier et al. [4] explained that illnesses in medieval medicine were treated with herbal portions and mixtures. Doctors built up a great deal of knowledge about using herbs to treat everyday illnesses. They said the medieval historians have studied the herbal mixtures used by the medieval doctors and believe that a number of them probably worked well. However, some herbal treatments also relied heavily on superstition and magic and were therefore less successful. The “medicine man” in African Traditional Medical Practice uses roots of some plants, their leaves, their stem, their roots, the back of some trees, water, nzu (Calm wood), honey, onions, gin, ginger, mud, black stone, oil, etc in some of his concoctions and drug administration.

The “medicine man” or herbalist believes most of the items he uses for everyday treatment are revealed to him by “Powers beyond”. Some even claim some ancestors visit them in dreams to make some of the revelations. Each medicine man is at liberty to apply his own method and there is no regulatory agency as is obtainable in the present day orthodox medical practice. The evidence of the efficacy of the treatment is based on the testimony of the person treated and not on the research evidence. However, there are some general practice among the medicine men or herbalists that necessitated the saying that “A naghiejioseemodoanya” (That you do not apply
pepper in any drug that will be used for eye treatment). This is an evidence of a general practice since all medicine men adhere to this and none has ever stood up to dispute or counter the above adage.

Kimble [2] observed that the “pharmacopeia” of the medicine man is an awesome assortment of herbs, entrails, charms and incantations. Its cures, for him, say more for the fortitude of the patient than the skill of the practitioner.

Evidence, though not documented abounds as to cures obtained through African Traditional Medical Practice. It is gratifying to note that almost “all aspects” of medicine are practiced within African Traditional Medicine – from internal medicine to surgery, psychiatry, orthopedics, reproductive medicine, etc. In some quarters, it is even argued that “treatments and cures” obtained in some of the areas is better than what is obtainable in the Western Orthodox Practice. Take the issue of “bone setting” for instance, it is still highly debated which of Western Orthodox Practice and ‘African Traditional Medicine’ manages bone fracture better. For such an argument to arise, it means there is concrete evidence of proper management of bone fracture in the African Traditional Practice – some patients with bone fractures are known to have been transferred from modern hospitals to native clinics at the request of either the patient or their relatives with a view to receiving better treatment.

Nkwuoma et al. [3] states that, most of the traditional bone setters are famous and versed to the extent that they handle cases that defy the orthopedic medicine. The evidence of such cures is shown on the health of the patient and not on scientific investigation. There is no statistical data that shows the success rate or otherwise of their medicaments.

One could argue that in the light of the claimed cures, one can allude some successes, for if there were no successes in African Traditional Medical Practice, it would have been long forgotten. If there were no successes, what could one remember in African Traditional Medical Cures in the face of the gigantic strides and achievements in Western Orthodox Medicine? African Traditional Medicine “Contends” with breakthroughs of orthodox medicine in scientific application in various field of diagnoses, medical history, laboratory tests, x-rays, ultrasound, etc. This is in addition to the day to day discoveries and manufacture of drugs that cure even the most stubborn illnesses. African Traditional Medicine has stood the advent of these breakthroughs. It sometimes even claims its own advancement and breakthroughs. Some medicine men claim to cure gonorrhea, syphilis, tuberculosis, AIDS, burns, skin diseases of all kinds, etc.

In all the claims of treatment and cures in African Traditional Medicine, a serious “Void” still exists in the area of documentation and publication. If there are successes in drug manufacture and treatment, they are not written down for posterity. Most of the innovations that could have had deep root in science become embedded in superstition thereby beclouding the scientific evidence. It is the writers’ belief that proper application of scientific tool in proving evidence and documentation in traditional medical practice will not only enhance health in Africa but improve medicine the world over.

A look at some history documents will reveal a similarity between African Traditional Medicine and Western Orthodox Practice at its inception. It is not a surprise since orthodox medical practice started in Africa – Egypt with priests/physicians being the early medical doctors. Ogbonna [6] mentioned – Imhotop – who lived in the reign of King Zocer of the 3rd Egyptian dynasty 2980-2900BC, as an example of such priest/physicians. According to Ogbonna, medical practice was restricted to family lineage or through adoption by the gods. As society developed, philosophers/physicians such as Aristotle and Hippocrates (Father of modern medicine) emerged. They rescued medical practice from the magico-priestly amalgam.

Unfortunately, African Traditional Medicine is still in the realm of this magico-priestly amalgam embedded in superstition with very few herbalists struggling to practice an independent and scientific herbal treatment. African Traditional Medicine should have rescued itself from superstition and charted its own course at the point the philosophers/physicians rescued orthodox medical practice from the magico-priestly amalgam. Orthodox medicine has since then become scientific with notable breakthroughs in various aspects of health. Every aspect and every new discovery is well documented while research in medical practice and drug manufacture is a daily programme. However, Okoro [7] attributed “This success” to the renaissance. He stated that the renaissance – from the 4th century A.D., jump-started medical science as it jump-started education. It ushered in scientific medicine and an explosion of scientific development from which the world has not looked back. With the renaissance also, one expected the African Traditional Medicine to have evolved more radically and
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