

# Traditional Medicine in Contextual African Society: On-Going Challenges



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## Abstract

The role of traditional medicine in contextual African society cannot be overemphasized. Due to the less financial implication on the part of patients(s) patronizing the medicine to treat a particular ailment. In recent time, attention by government and relevant stakeholders in the health sectors in African tend to shift their compendium effort to improve modern health medicine, this has yielded little effort. In light of this a greater percentage of African population still resorts to traditional medicine due to the less financial implication and accessibility. Over the years, traditional African medicine seems to face some ongoing challenges. It is due to these recurring mitigating challenges that this paper intend to explore and map-out modalities to surmount the challenges. The challenges farfetched by the researcher were lack of usage of information communication technology (ICT), lack of adequate funding, lack of sufficient awareness, religion/cultural interference, unethical practices, deforestation of plant medicine. Similarly, way forwards out the challenges were map-out. It was concluded that, the possible solutions as pointed-out by the researcher if given prior attention will help to remedy the bedeviling challenges facing traditional medicine.

**Keywords:** Traditional Medicine, African Society, Medicine

## Introduction

### What is Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine can also be known as folk or native medicine. Traditional medicine may include formalized aspect of folk medicine, that is to say longstanding remedies passed on and practiced by lay people [1]. According to the [2] in some countries, traditional medicine or non-conventional medicine may be termed complementary medicine. But it is pertinent to point-out that there is a wide difference between traditional medicine and complementary medicine. It is the oldest form of health care system that has stood the test of time [3]. Traditional medicine is the ancient and culture-bound medical practice which existed before the application of modern science to health [4]. Traditional medicine is the ancient and culture-bound medical practice which existed in human societies before the application of modern science to health [4]. According to the World Health Organization, traditional medicine is “the sum total of the knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health, as

well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illnesses” [5]. Traditional medicine is often used a vast majority in African to remedy common ailment. In same vein Romero-Daza [6] opined it is the only source of medical care for a greater proportion of the population.

### Characteristics of Traditional Medicine

According to the World Health Organization Report 2000, the following are some of the common characteristics of traditional medicines [4].

- a. Traditional medicine is based on a belief that health is a state of balance between several opposing aspects in the human body. Illness occurs when an individual falls out of balance, physically or mentally. The “causes” of imbalance could be change of weather, intake of certain food; external factors, such as magical or supernatural powers; mental stimulation and societal reasons. Traditional medicine tries to restore the balance using different therapies.

b. Traditional medicine is based on the needs of individuals. Different people may receive different treatments even if they suffer from the same disease. Traditional medicine is based on a belief that each individual has his or her own constitution and social circumstances which result in different reactions to “causes of disease” and treatment.

c. Traditional medicine applies a holistic approach. It considers a person in his or her totality within an ecological context and usually will not only look after the sick part of the body. Besides giving treatment, traditional practitioners usually provide advice on lifestyles and healthy behaviour.

d. Traditional medicine precedes modern medicine. Most traditional remedies have not been evaluated by sound scientific methods. This means that, at this stage, traditional medicine is not easily understood by modern medicine. However, traditional remedies have been “field-tested” by tens of thousands of people for hundreds of years.

### On-Going Challenges Facing Traditional Medicine in Contextual African Society

The following are on-going challenges facing in traditional medicine in African society.

**a. Lack of Usage of Information Communication Technology (ICT):** Information communication technology (ICT) is an umbrella term that includes any communication device, encompassing radio, television, cell phones, computer and network hardware, satellite systems and so on, as well as the various services and appliance with them such as video conferencing and distance learning [7]. In the field of medicine ICT related facilities are vital tools which help practitioners to be inclined with novel and practical steps to be taken in their quest for new medicine to solve patients (human) related health problems. The world revolves round the ability of man to access proven information to enhance his productivity. In most developed societies of China, their traditional medicines are quite more effective due to access to proven information made available by the umbrella of information communication technology. In developing traditional society of Africa, such as Nigeria, most traditional medicine practitioners do not have access to ICT information, relating to a particular way of applying such medicine they intends to use. This is due to the fact that, most of them are not ICT inclined. Overtime this seems to pave way for lack of standardized traditional medicine in contextual African society in terms of these medicines achieving the expected results.

**b. Lack of Adequate Funding:** Adequate funding is an important variable that could cater for the success of a given project, programme and innovation. Adequate funding is a driving force to achieve a predetermined outcome in any facet of human endeavor [8]. Funding assist practitioners in acquisition

of the needed tools, materials, and gain the needed expertise in a given profession. This is due to the fact that it helps traditional medicine inventors to acquire necessary materials and use the needed equipments deeming fitting, so as to achieve an expected result. In developed society of Asia, traditional medicines are often well funded by government, individuals and non-governmental agencies. In contextual African society, reverse is the case were lack of sufficient or adequate funding is the case. Due to this fact, necessary procedures are not followed in the process of production of traditional medicine; this often results in loquacious medicine with no remedy effect on a given patient. Similarly, needed equipments are not also use in the process due to lack of fund. In light of the forgoing Olu [9] opined that lack of adequate financial support throughout the system limits rapid progress in developing traditional medicine.

**c. Lack of sufficient Awareness:** Awareness is a product for accomplishing the goals of a suitable research and increase productivity of practitioners [10]. In same vein, Akarowhe [11] opined that awareness is a means of enlighten the public about a given issue of concern which seems to affect them. Through awareness, proven information about new way to enhance effective diagnosis, treatment and prevention of a particular ailment given to an anticipated number of patients (individuals). In traditional African society, awareness among traditional medicine practitioners is often lacking and even among patients. While in some other case, channels of communication often give half-backed information to practitioners, which on the aggregate retrogress the potency of traditional medicine in Africa. Additionally, the health sector which plays a vital role in inculcating modern practice on traditional medicine practitioners, in recent time has not show a much interest. In similarly, organization of exhibitions for African traditional medicine is not given keen attention by relevant stakeholders in the health sector.

**d. Religion/Cultural interference:** Culture is a horizontal and vertical dilemma of a societal expressed in ones way of life, while religion is ones belief system in accordance to a Supreme Being norms. Addy [12] opined that traditional medicine tends to relate to culture and be influenced by it. Religion and culture remodels an individual (patients and practitioners) belief system to either apply/produce a particular medicine or not. It is observed that religion and cultural beliefs of an individual influences the way he/she opt to carry out a particular traditional medicine in diagnosis, treatment and prevention of his/her besetting ailment. The light of the forgoing creates room for disparity in the use of traditional medicine in African. For instance, in Christendom, traditional medicine use as an alternative for abortion is discourage among believers in the African setting; in same similitude, cultural beliefs among the Isokos forbids a female child from taking medicine that will make them not to bear children.

**e. Unethical Practices:** Unethical practices are practices which are not in conformity with a given institutional code-of-conduct, or a given profession or institution. It is anticipated that due to globalization, human Endeavour opt to be re-modernized from a primitive way of performing a specific function to a modern way in a given society. Despite globalization in human Endeavour, traditional medicine in African society is still faced with problems of using of incarnation and sacrifices among others. In light of this Obu (2015) submitted that traditional medicine practitioners are mainly illiterate and practice in the general community or in secret shrines which are mostly in rural areas. Overtime, due to this barbaric practices patronage in the long-run of this medicine is often discourage by most patients.

**f. Deforestation of Plant Medicine:** In the medical field the role of plant cannot be underestimated due to the fact that it nurtures/helps the production of medicine. In contextual African society especially in Sub-Sahara and some other parts, most plants proven to be for medical purpose are often cultivated for domestic use (cooking), roofing, and furniture's among other. Similarly, Obu [9] supplemented that poor agricultural practices, indiscriminate bush burning and uncontrolled harvest in are threatening the easy availability of some medical plants. The resultant effect of this is lack of sufficient plants to be used by traditional practitioners to remedy patient ailment.

### Possible Solution

For tradition medicine in contextual African Society to surmount the on-going challenges is facing, the following solution should be given keen attention by practitioners, stakeholders in the health sector, governments in Africa States and the international community.

**a. Inclusive Education:** Inclusive education is a vital tool for success in a particular field of human Endeavour. Through inclusive education the standard of traditional medicine will be raised from the quasic tradition to a more modern type. In light of this Obu [9] observed that the development of formal education and training for traditional as well as complementary medicine practitioners and their establishment in the public health services delivery system will pave way for improvement. Similarly, educational avenue such as awareness, field trip and workshop will help tradition medicine practitioners to be enlightened on global best practices on how to carry out their job effectively. Education will avail practitioners of the opportunity of sourcing for improvised information through the use of information communication technology (ICT); this is due to the fact that the role of ICT in any field of human endeavor and society cannot be fathom. Through education, practitioners will improve on the aggregate productivity – traditional medicine production, and treatment of patients' ailment.

**b. Partnership:** Partnership among Government, non-governmental agencies should be encouraged, due to the fact that it will help in increasing aggregate productivity of traditional medicine and overtime the health sector of a country. Partnership will go a long way in cementing the communication lags experienced between the said parties [10]. This will enable traditional medical practitioners to share information that would aid the advancement of traditional medicine.

**c. Retooling Traditional medicine Agencies or Instituting Traditional Medicine Regulatory Agencies:** It is pertinent to institute a regulatory agency to oversee the affairs/practices of traditional medicine. By Government instituting or retooling of a regulatory agency that oversee traditional medicine will help to remove some of the unwanted, barbaric practices associated with traditional medicine. This will similarly overtime assist in raising the standard of the health sector of a particular county.

**d. Monitory and Supervision:** Monitory and supervision should be inculcated in institutions responsible for overseeing the affairs to traditional medicine. This will pave way for benchmarking for improved African medicine and similar deter unscrupulous elements related to traditional medicine. Similarly, Obu [9] recommended that monitoring, supervision and evaluation of practices (both ethical and technical) will help efficacy of remedies.

**e. Adequate Funding:** Government should grant adequate funding to traditional medicine institution and practitioners. This may be in the form is assisting practitioner with small and medium term loans with less interest rate, which will assist to enlarge the scope of traditional medicine and similarly to be persistence in the production of medicine and treatment of patients. This is due to the fact that a larger proportion of Africans depends on it because of the less financial implication involves in the acquisition of traditional medicine.

**f. Afforestation Policy:** Afforestation is the science and process of encouraging the planting/cultivation/production of trees among a given proportion of people. Afforestation will help traditional medicine and modern medicine practitioners to have the needed plants so as to utilize it for the benefit of their patients. Hence, Government enforcing afforestation policies will simultaneously equipped practitioner for a better service delivery and also an improved health sector.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In contemporary society, traditional medicine plays a vital role in modern health sector. In Africa, little success has been achieved due to the bedeviling challenges facing traditional medicine to attain its ultimate height in spite the trend of globalization, these challenges tends to dwindle/face-out the place of traditional medicine. The possible solutions pointed-out are the researcher if given prior attention will help to remedy the bedeviling challenges facing traditional medicine.

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