

Integrate for Efficiency: Traditional Yoruba Medicine in Nigeria

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African traditional medicine is a mystery to much of the western world. It is misunderstood, sometimes to the point of causing fear. The traditional medical practices of the Yoruba in Nigeria, however, offer fresh outlooks on the concept of health and unique healing treatment to the world medical community. These methods should be examined with an open mind, further developed, and finally integrated with western medical procedures in order to provide the best medical service possible.

Among the Yoruba in Nigeria, as in many African cultures, health and religion are interrelated. In the Yoruba mindset, all healing comes from God, including that of the western medical doctor. The Yoruba believe in a power called *Ifa*. *Ifa* is God's angel chosen to possess an infinite source of knowledge. *Ifa*'s knowledge includes animals, plants, oral incantations or *ofo*, divination, medicinal plants, and all sciences associated with healing diseases.¹ This "wise man to whom nature has taught her secrets" is the controller of language, culture, philosophy, and religion. *Ifa* knows the causes, secret names, origins, and chemical compositions of all things.² This supreme being gives the knowledge of healing through the power of *Ifa* and God to those who prove themselves worthy.

It is important to realize that there are several aspects of Yoruba healing practices. The main types are herbal medicine and rituals including incantations, prayer and sacrifice. The feature most accepted by western doctors is herbal medicine. Yoruba doctors have an impressive store of knowledge on a wide range of plant species. These plants are often used in a similar way to medications provided by western doctors. Much less accepted are the ritual healings. These rituals are open to the public, as healing is seen as a group effort. Prayers and sacrifices to

¹ M. Akin Makinde, *African Philosophy, Culture, and Traditional Medicine* (Ohio: Center for International Studies Ohio University, 1988) 6.

² Makinde 88.

ancestors are common, and often accompanied by meaningful incantations. Yoruba healing frequently utilizes several of these aspects to heal a single problem.

An example of a healing ritual combining more than one of the features mentioned above is a healing ritual using *ase*. *Ase* is a concoction of natural ingredients that are chemically transformed into a powder. The powder is then put into the horn of an animal, wrapped in a cotton cloth to prevent spillage, and stored until it is needed. One particular type of *ase* includes the tail of a large rat, a whole chameleon, and an assortment of plant substances. For success, the healer must understand the nature of all parts of the *ase* as well as their potential effects on human illness. To perform the ritual, the healer touches his tongue to the tip of the horn, symbolizing the power of speech, and recites an incantation to provoke the power of each part of the *ase* substance.³ For the *ase* described above the incantation may go something like this: “Whatever suggestion of color a chameleon makes is always accepted by the heavens or the deity; whatever the big rat tells the earth it accepts without argument or complaints, therefore, whatever I say must come to pass.”⁴ This incantation may be combined with prayers and ancestral sacrifice or even a dancing ritual in order to insure success. The words of *ase* can only be reversed by counter-medicine.

Counter-medicine is another form of Yoruba healing. It is usually protective or preventative. Native injections and medicinal rings are two types of counter-medicine, but the most popular is called *madarikan* which, translated literally, means “don’t knock your head against mine.”⁵ Charms called *owo* are another type of counter-medicine. One form of *owo* protects the person or thing wearing it from harm. Another form is used to apprehend robbers.

³ Makinde 93.

⁴ Makinde 93.

⁵ Makinde 93.

One example of *owo* involves placing two magnetized brooms either at the entrances to a house or in conspicuous places within the house. When a thief enters and sees the brooms, he will begin to sweep and will not stop until the spell has been removed.⁶

Yoruba medicine also has a place for evil. Take, for example, *Olugbohun*. *Olugbohun* is a charm representing an echo. It acts as a catalyst to words, making them much more powerful than they are naturally. It can be used ethically, as in prayer, or maliciously, as in applying curses.⁷ Also consider *Gbetugbetu*, a charm used during crisis. With *Gbetugbetu*, words spoken are powerful commands that must be followed.⁸ It can be used for protection, for example to force an enemy to put down a gun; but it also has an enormous potential for harm, for instance to compel an enemy to jump off of a cliff.

As one learns about Yoruba traditional medicine an essential question comes to mind: Can it be considered medicine by western standards? There are a few things to consider when deliberating this question. First, concrete definitions of health and medicine need to be established. With this foundation, the similarities and differences in western and Yoruba medical philosophies and the amount and type of training required can be used to judge the legitimacy of Yoruba medicine in the context of a western criterion.

Definitions of health vary slightly from culture to culture, but the basic idea remains similar. According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary health is, “the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit.”⁹ In the Yoruba culture, there are three different dimensions of health. The first is *ilera* which comes from a synthesis of the words *lile*, which means strong, and

⁶ Makinde 93.

⁷ Makinde 95.

⁸ Makinde 95.

⁹ “health” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (<<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary>>, 2006) 22 Sept. 2006.

ara, which means body. *Ilera* is a functional approach to health. Next is *san* or *sunwon*.¹⁰ *San* is concerned with attaining the ideal. Finally there is *alafia* which is general well-being. When asked to define their concept of health, most Africans included the ability to perform their work in their definition.¹¹ Americans would most likely emphasize feeling rather than ability in their interpretation of the meaning of “health.” Synthesizing the ideas of Yoruba and Americans gives a definition resembling the following: “the ability for mind, body, and spirit to function and to feel close to or at the ideal level.” Medicine, then, is any process by which one attempts to achieve or maintain health.

Accepted evidence of fact differs from culture to culture. Yoruba, for example, tend to rely on emotion, intuition, and dreams. They believe that these signs are sent to them by a higher power such as ancestral spirits or a God-like being.¹² Westerners are more likely to use scientific analysis and research. Each of these methods of verifying fact has been shown to have its disadvantages. The evidence used by the Yoruba to distinguish fact may be too emotionally based, neglecting occasionally to allow for unbiased information to enter the picture. The western ideas don’t allow for emotions and the possibility of communication from a higher being. In both cultures, however, experience is a major shaper of belief. If a method has worked once for a person it is likely that he or she will consider using that method again. This reliance on experiential proof is common to all cultures around the globe.

Both the Yoruba healers and western medical practitioners believe their medicine heals through a powerful force. In the Yoruba culture that authority is God or a similar Supreme

¹⁰ This term derives from *sun* which means to move towards and *won* which means measurement or standard

¹¹ Shirley Lindenbaum and Margaret Lock eds, Knowledge, Power, & Practice: The Anthropology of Medicine and Everyday Life (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) 160.

¹² Lindenbaum 157-60.

Being, while westerners rely on the power of science to heal. The powers are very distinct, but the concept of using medicine to heal through a ubiquitous force is similar in both cultures.

Another factor that is important in deciding whether or not Yoruba healing is medicine is the training undergone by Yoruba healers in relation to that of western medical practitioners. Yoruba healers go through internships and study medicine for a long time before they are allowed to practice. They must memorize crucial information about diseases, medicines and other forms of healing, and which method of healing will work best for each disease or individual case, just like western doctors. Yoruba training differs somewhat in the fact that Yoruba practitioners are seen to either inherit the ability to perform as a healer from their parents, or they go through a demanding process of internship before being deemed worthy. Proficient medicine by Yoruba standards consists of knowing the nature of the disease as well as the things that will cause it to go away, thus healing the ill. This concept is also true in biomedicine, except the techniques to get rid of the illness are usually dissimilar. Yoruba doctors-in-training must also take exams to prove they are learning the things they are being taught. These exams differ from western exams in that if a Yoruba fails the exam it is seen as a sign that they are not meant to practice and they are no longer trained.¹³ Both western medical doctors and Yoruba doctors go through rigorous training and examination before they are allowed to practice medicine.

Some may use the aforementioned potential for harm to argue that Yoruba healers don't practice medicine. Western medicine, however, also has potential for harm. Consuming too much of a prescription can have fatal effects. Taking a prescription for too long of a time period can cause addiction. Doctors also have the tools at hand to harm or kill a patient at any time,

¹³ Makinde 89.

especially when they are undergoing surgical procedure. Harmful capacity is not unique to Yoruba medicine.

Yoruba and western doctors both rely on experiences to provide proof of fact, powerful forces to heal their patients through their medicine, and arduous training and exams to ensure competency. Seeing that both Yoruba healers and western practitioners practice medicine in their own forms, it is now imperative to recognize the benefits of integrating these distinctive forms of medicine. When discussing this topic, the whole of Africa and the various types of indigenous medicine found around the continent must be taken into account. First and possibly most beneficial, synthesizing these types of medicine would cut healthcare costs. Western medical technology is not produced in Africa, and importing it is very costly. By using both types of medicine, less equipment would need to be imported to cover the demand. The next factor is the availability of facilities. South of the Sahara, the ratio of traditional healers to the population is about 1:500 while the ratio of western doctors to the population is close to 1:40,000.¹⁴ Obviously, then, it would be impossible for Africans to receive strictly western healthcare.

Even if western medical care was free and easily accessible to all Africans, it is unlikely that they would completely abandon the indigenous practitioners. Integration also allows for respect for the beliefs of Africans. The Yoruba believe that their style of medical care has been healing and preventing illness for as long as they can remember. Westerners do not have the right to interfere and attempt to change this belief. Africans in general don't have a problem with western medicine; they simply see it as a complement to their own style of healing and use it in conjunction with their traditional methods. The medical community outside of Africa would also benefit from merging with traditional procedures if only it would open its mind to new ideas and techniques.

¹⁴ "Launch of Traditional Medicine School a Milestone" ([The Herald](#), 8 May 2006).

With so many benefits one may wonder why amalgamation hasn't already occurred to a more extensive degree. The answer lies in prejudice. Many westerners feel that their ideas are superior. They therefore reject African ideas as primitive, especially in "scientific" areas such as medicine. Contributing to this preconception is the traditional secrecy of Yoruba medical practitioners. Healing is considered a sacred occupation, and its secrets are shared with only the elite few who are deemed worthy. The Yoruba, like many African societies, orally pass information from generation to generation, so there is a lack of written material to be analyzed by western scientists. It is also very difficult to scientifically examine healing through higher powers, ancestral spirits, and such. Since western scientists have not been given the chance to experience and analyze the Yoruba methods, they have been rejected by most. Another reason why integration hasn't occurred is the lack of western medical facilities. Without access to such places, many Africans are left to rely solely on traditional methods of healing.

There are three factors that must be in place before integration can be a success. First, western medical doctors must be open to the ideas of Yoruba and other forms of traditional African medicine. For biomedical and traditional practitioners to unite in Africa they only need to be open to the idea of working with one another as peers. For synthesis in the west, however, these western doctors must also be prepared to experience African healing and consider it for their own health. Westerners open to African ideas is only one of three factors. Yoruba healers and other traditional medical healers must be open to sharing their methods and knowledge. They must allow western doctors to examine and analyze them using their own systems of finding facts. Finally, the patients must be willing to use varying styles of medicine in maintaining their health. This factor already exists to some extent in Africa. One study concerning the use of indigenous medicine, western style biomedicine, and Islamic faith healing

among Nigerians proves the willingness of patients to employ a variety of methods in their healing regimen. Ninety-seven percent of those surveyed reported to combine a number of activities in maintaining health. Nigerians in this same study reported to use western facilities for treatments such as initial diagnosis, accident treatment, and surgery. Traditional medicine was used for mental health problems such as bad dreams or sleeplessness.¹⁵ This submission to combining methods doesn't exist to such an extent in western culture. Westerners typically only use biomedicine and sometimes prayer in order to keep themselves healthy. This bias is beginning to change, however, as African herbal medicines are becoming more popular on other continents, as well as procedures such as acupuncture.

There has already been some progress towards recognition of the strengths of African traditional medicine outside Africa and to integration in Africa and eventually the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes the merit of traditional treatments.¹⁶ On August seventeenth, 2006 the federal government in Nigeria approved a policy to support and regulate traditional medicine in the country. They also decided to establish a Traditional Medical Council in Nigeria. The purpose is to eliminate fake practitioners. It will promote the appropriate use of traditional medicine in Nigeria, the export of manufactured traditional medicine, and national development goals aimed at reducing poverty.¹⁷ This is a huge step for Yoruba, which is mainly practiced in Nigeria. A final sign of hope is the establishment of a traditional medical school in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (Zinatha) launched a medical school recently. Classes were set to begin in June of 2006 with the hope of promoting knowledge and acceptance of African traditional medicine, both within the African culture and in

¹⁵ Lindenbaum 154.

¹⁶ Makinde 8.

¹⁷ "FG Endorses Bill to Regulate Traditional Medicine School in Nigeria" (Vanguard, 17 August 2006).

other places.¹⁸ Though this is far from the center of Yoruba practice, it is a sign of hope for the overall development of traditional medical practice in Africa.

Yoruba medical practice is a rich part of the Nigerian culture. Like other African traditional medicine, it also has a lot to offer the rest of the world if it is given the chance. This type of medicine has survived centuries and the constant pressure by westerners to abandon it in favor of biomedicine. If it had no merit, it wouldn't have lasted through the burdens of time and prejudice against it. It is time for the western public to open their minds to a new type of healing. Development of this method has already begun with the support of governmental organizations and universities. By incorporating both Yoruba medicine and western medicine the cost of healthcare would be cut considerably, new ideas would be brought to the world medical community, Yoruba beliefs would be better accommodated, and Nigerians could become more self-sufficient in the healthcare aspect. Considering these benefits, we should make an attempt to continue the process of recognition and amalgamation that has already begun for African traditional medicine. Integration would provide a much more efficient means of medical care. Perhaps someday African herbal medicines and techniques will be commonly used all over the world, bringing much-needed revenue to African countries.

¹⁸ "Launch of Traditional Medicine School a Milestone".

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