FISH IN INDIGENOUS HEALING PRACTICES AMONG THE ILAJE OF COASTAL YORUBALAND OF NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
A recent historical survey of the Ilaje littoral communities located in the Western Niger Delta of Nigeria strongly indicated that, some indigenous healing devices with high level of potency had been evolved by the people over the years without being researched. The adoption of fishes in medical practices had resulted in potent socio–spiritual healing for ages. In spite of its enormous contributions to health care delivery, academics have not devoted much research focus on the area. As an antithesis to Western notion of no scientific ingenuity in pre – colonial African societies, the paper discusses the various medicinal devices, as well as the merits and problems of indigenous fish therapy among the Ilaje people in a typical African environment. It also suggests an inter–marriage of traditional with orthodox medical healing devices for a better health care delivery in the society.

Keywords: Indigenous, Healing, Practices, Coastal, Fish and historical

Introduction
In the pre-colonial African civilizations, the healer occupied a specific place within the community. However, these civilizations have been ravaged over the years by incessant warfare, the diversionary slave trade, colonization and European technical development, coupled with social phenomena created by independence as well as the current globalization trends (Bassey W.A., 1992:42). As a result of these factors, most significant indigenous African medical practices have, except in the remotest areas, lost their originality. It is challenging to note that Nigeria (Ilaje society inclusive), has been witnessing gradual disappearance of professional traditional healers, as well as decline of their knowledge for
centuries. Thus, one must actually search for the vestiges (Bassey W.A. 1992:47:48) The Ilaje are a Yoruba fishing people in the coastal Yorubaland, the western fringe of the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

In viewing indigenous African medical care services from the perspective of history, some pertinent questions that readily come to mind are; what was the nature and level of potency of traditional medicine in pre-colonial African societies? Who were the custodians of African traditional medicine? What were the perennial diseases or ailments which the practitioners battled with and how successful were they? What methods (both spiritual and physical) did they use to diagnose the various forms of ailments and how relevant are these methods to the contemporary healing services? These and many other questions are to be put into consideration whenever the question of African traditional medicine is raised (Ogungbemi S. 2007:1) Today, many indigenous knowledge systems are at risk of becoming extinct because of rapidly changing natural environments and fast pacing economic, political and cultural changes on a global scale. Unfortunately, at present, Nigerian Western trained medical doctors are controlled with a much wider choice of therapeutic possibilities than they care to recognize or imagine (Bassey W.A. 19192:46) Some of them, however, have convinced themselves that they alone are competent to cure all ailments because they belong to a system which excludes any other practitioners. So, they, perhaps in ignorance disregard the other possibilities to the detriment of themselves, the advancement of medical science and the well-being of the people.

Worse still, traditional practices diminish as they are seen as either inappropriate or unacceptable for new challenges or because, they adapt too slowly (Omachonu G.S. 2009:165). Many traditional medical practices disappear just because of the intrusion of foreign technologies. The tragedy of the impending disappearance of indigenous knowledge is most obvious to those who have developed it and make a living through it. But the implication for others can be detrimental as well, when traditional skills, technologies, artifacts, problem-solving strategies and expertise are lost (Omachonu G.S. 2009:165) This therefore calls for urgent need to revertilise and firmly entrench the practice and value of indigenous knowledge in our modern society so that African medical history would not be relegated to the background.

A great exponent of traditional medical science in Nigeria, Mume, has correctly pointed out that, contrary to Eurocentric thinking, African traditional medicine is often based on very close observation of nature and a real capacity for understanding empirical relations (Bassey W.A. 1992:46) Bassey Andah has noted that, traditional medicine men are often
knowledgeable about parts of plants or animals, in particular, the human body, and organic and inorganic substances which have in them characteristics corresponding to what the western man may call the properties of matter (Bassey W.A. 1992:46)). For instance, properties of herbs, knowledge of application of heat, water, including incantations are some main sources of effective therapies. The sap of special plants, seeds, roots; animals or fishes are known to have purgative qualities for the treatment of various ailments among African peoples.

The thrust of the study therefore is to bring to the fore the trado-medical prowess of the Ilaje people within the context of their littoral ecological peculiarities which have shaped their medical culture or indigenous healing knowledge. The study argues that, the people had evolved a potent and formidable traditional medical science and technology which have been innovatively utilizing the available aquatic resources since pre-colonial era. The study is partly an anti-thesis to the western assertion of “no arts, no science” in pre-colonial African societies (Okon E.U. 1974:8) It also argues in favour of the practice and sustenance of indigenous African medical philosophy for a healthier society.

The study adopts a narrative historical approach. Identification, extraction and validation of medicinally valued fish were done through interview with selected natural healing practitioners as well as fishermen who are knowledgeable in the science and technology of fishing in the region.

D.M., Warren has defined indigenous knowledge (I.K) as “the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society, it contrasts with the international system generated by universities, research institutions and private firms, it is the basis for local-level decision making in agriculture, healthcare, food preparation, education, natural-resource management and a host of other activities in rural communities” (Warren D.M. 1991:1)

J.M. Flavier viewed indigenous knowledge as “the information base for a society which facilitates communication and decision making.” (Warren D.M, L.J. Slikkerveer & Brokensha D. 1995:479) Indigenous information systems are dynamic and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems. Omotoye Olorode has held that, “knowledge or scientific knowledge is a kind of consciousness which develops along with society in process by which man produces his needs, reproduces himself and interacts generally with his environment” (Omotoye O. 2003:210) According to Omotoye Olorode, “traditional technology lays emphasis on the quality of life as measured in human cultural and spiritual terms rather than in purely material terms, its goal was to equip everyone with the basic knowledge of how all essential
tasks are instilled with the feeling of self-respect borne out of confidence in their own ability to help themselves” (Omotoye O. 2003:219).

In the light of this standpoint, knowledge is germane to the realization of the survival of man with due cognizance to those beliefs that are institutionalized in a particular culture or community with a view to enhancing the growth, progress and development of the individual in particular and mankind in general. Fred Dretske identified beliefs and other ways of knowing as “product of culture, with language as well as the circumstances of peoples’ lives playing important and complementing roles” (Dretske F. 2000:4:29) This assertion forms the basis of the belief that knowledge generated by any community is epistemologically relevant; hence much premium must be placed on African indigenous knowledge and indeed indigenous Ilaje medicinal knowledge.

The position maintained here is that, indigenous knowledge is a science in its own right derived from the resources of the local environment and it is not as undeveloped as the Western anthropologists have made the world to believe. The main target of indigenous knowledge is the community where it is produced and thus its understanding and immediate relevance would better be appreciated within that contextual frame (Laleye S.A 2007:164)

We shall thus consider the medicinal value of fish among the Ilaje people of Western Niger Delta.

**Fishes in Indigenous Healing Practices**

The use of plant and animal resources in natural healing practices is widespread in Nigeria including Ilajeland and natural healing practitioners are usually the first sources of intervention for health-related problems in an overwhelming proportion of the population (Ogunbiyi F.O. 2000) The premium on the use of fish and their derivatives in treatment preparations is evident in the range of available literature on diversity, uses, trade and implication for conservation (Akindayo A.S. Online:1) Studies have shown that science of natural healing; using fish derivatives with fusion of herbs and other natural ingredients had been an age long practice among the people. However, among the traditional medicine practitioners in general and the Ilaje people inclusive, there are problems of accurate data on medical history (Ogunbiyi F.O. 2010).

Medicinal uses of fish in the area are legion without adequate tapping, and the list of fishes of medicinal value is by no means exhaustive. Some of the reasons for these phenomena are; lack of unwritten records on medicinal practices due to high illiteracy level, and also many individual practitioners usually make their healing knowledge a closely guided secret. This explains why many recipes are still in custody of many practitioners or families.
who are reluctant to make them available, to others. During interviews with various fishing and traditional medicine experts, the following fishes have been listed, for having medicinal value in the area.

**Fresh water fish**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ilaje</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Scientific name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ojiji</td>
<td>Electric fish</td>
<td><em>Genius glarias</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Aro</td>
<td>Mud fish</td>
<td><em>Zilli/nitolica/aurea</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Epiya</td>
<td>Tilapia</td>
<td><em>Heterotis niloticus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Agbadagiri</td>
<td>African bonny tongue</td>
<td><em>Gymnarchus niloticus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ohanrin</td>
<td>Mormyrid</td>
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**Marine fish**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ilaje</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Scientific name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ofon</td>
<td>Shiny nose</td>
<td><em>Penaeus notialis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ide-mefun</td>
<td>Shrimps</td>
<td><em>Chaetodipterus goreensis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fontonfonton</td>
<td>Cuttle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Akaraba</td>
<td>Spade fish</td>
<td><em>Raja miraleus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nate</td>
<td>Sting-ray</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Oyiluda</td>
<td>Sword fish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Yanyan/legure</td>
<td>Shark</td>
<td><em>Sphyrna sp.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Igangan</td>
<td>Silver cat fish</td>
<td><em>Nigrodigitatus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Obira</td>
<td>Red snappers</td>
<td><em>Lates niloticus</em></td>
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To enhance strong kick of pregnancy for instance, fresh electric fish (ojiji) is combined with gun powder (etu) and alligator pepper (itaye) burnt together, ground into powder for chewing periodically by pregnant women. Also, for turgidity and strong erection in men, electric fish is combined with parts of gorilla and he-goat penis and alligator pepper, burnt together and mixed with honey (oyin) for periodic licking. Electric fish is also used in many other ways such as brain stimulation (ariran), infertility, stroke etc (Ojoade O. 2009)

Mud- cat fish (aro) is used in a complex and vast regimen. It is mixed with other ingredients to prepare medicinal concoction (aheje) to treat various ailments such as abdominal problems, restoration of womb tranquility (etuno, eda etc), worm attack, overheating of the womb etc (Majofodun S. 2009) Fresh tilapia (*epiya*) is cut alive, mixed with water lily (*pese*), native maggi (*eragiri*) and pepper are cooked as a concoction for eating by pregnant women for energizing weak pregnancy. It is also prepared to cure small pox. (Ali T. 2009)

Among the people, cray – fish is mixed with water lettuce (*tebetebi*), soldier ants (*epen*), native magi (*eragiri*) and pepper are cooked for pregnant women to energize weak pregnancy. Also shrimps (*ide-mefun*) are mixed with scent leaf (*efinrin*) and alligator pepper and cook for young ones for retention and vibration of the brain (Ali T. 2009) Shrimps are also used to prepare dish (*Tapan*) for purgative purpose. In the area, herbalists use the white stony particles (*eta-origho ofon*) in the head of shiny nose (*ofon*) with parts of raffia material...
(efunruno eko) with palm kernel oil (unden-didun) for the cure of children’s (Oka ori or jafuje) (Ojoade O. 22009)

Also, the shell (pepefun) of the scuttle fish (fontonfonton) is ground and mixed with palm oil, and rubbed around the edge of boil in the body to facilitate formation of pus and dryness of the boil (Oyetomi T.A. 2010) Spade-fish (akaraba) is burnt with alligator pepper, ground into powder for chewing by women during labour for blood regulation (sejebi) (Eyinmore E. 2009) Another good case is that, the tail of sting ray (urandi-adiygbe) is dried and being chewed with alligator pepper by pregnant women during labour. It acts as a force or push mechanism (ogbingbin) (Eyinmore E. 2009) It should be equally understood that, in most cases, these traditional healers involve psychic power and knowledge of treatment in their medical endeavours.

Large fishes such as sting ray (nate), shark (yanyan) and sword fish (oyinluda) contain fat which is used in various ways for body treatment and nourishment. The fat (epo) extracted from these fishes is said to be medicinally important when fried and melted and used to eat roasted or cooked yam or plantain, bread or mixed with dry garri (epo garri). It is equally used to massage swollen parts of the body, dislocated or broken bones. It also serves as general body immunity and prevention of anthritis (Ayepegba F. 2009)

The people believe that there are some special species of fish which are specifically noted for special taste and body nourishment, especially when prepared in special delicacies such as roasting (hihon), pepper soup (ugbagba), palm oil soup (kereghe or otaisan) and bitter leaf soup (obe – orugbo). The special fishes include, silver cat-fish (igangan), red snappers (obira), sole (abolibo), shiny nose (ofon), bonga (folo), mullet (itoko), African bonny tongue (agbadagiri), mormyroid (oharin) and tilapia (epiya) (Owoleye I. 2009) In addition, these fishes are also used to prepare special concoction by mixing with some native spices to treat constipation (ikefu) stomach imbalance as well as ejecting congealed blood from women who has just been delivered of a baby.

Challenges of Indigenous Healing Practices

In order to have prophylactic measures, the traditional healers engage in ritualisation, sacrifices, giving respect to taboos, planting special pharmacopoeia around dwelling places, keeping rebuking charms around them etc (Bassey W.A. 1992:50) For these practices, some people refer to them as fetish and as such refuse to patronize them. Even if these are efficacious, it is believed in some quarters that traditional healers have inadequate knowledge of the chemical composition of the herbs or ingredients they administer. Although the active ingredients in some herbs or fish used might have been identified and they might be
coexisting with those active substances, many others have no relevance to the diseases being treated and, in some cases, injurious to the patient. Also, many of the concoctions are likely to contain bacteria and dangerous impurities which are unfriendly to human health (Bassey W.A 1992:50)

In some cases, there is inadequacy of scientific grounding of the traditional practice. True systematic practice of medicine is based on a thorough knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of the human body, symptomatologies and psychosomatic aspects in which western medicine seems to be well versed. Traditional medicine however seems to be well ahead mainly in the psychic realm (Bassey W.A 1992:50) Many traditional healers seem to have failed to understand that similar symptoms may not always indicate the same diseases or ailments. This makes them apply the same medicine, without proper diagnosis to different diseases, which may be dangerous to the patient.

Another problem which characterizes traditional medicine is hoarding of knowledge. The herbalists build up so much mystery around their preparations and medicinal prowess perhaps as a means of ensuring that their scientific knowledge remains their exclusive reserve (Oto J. & Acham O.M. 2009:160) In fact, some of them claim to have received their healing knowledge from dreams, gods, ancestors, spirits and as such refuse to divulge it to other persons. Even if these claims could be true, the unfortunate thing is that, such practitioners in this area invariably die with their knowledge, which may likely mean extinction to such important knowledge if nobody else knows anything about it.

Moreover, the practice of traditional medicine is discouraged by some elite. For instance, practitioners of western medicine under the auspices of the medical and dental council of Nigeria see it as an anachronistic profession or practice. They therefore put no premium on it. This is not unconnected with some factors such as inadequate scientific proofs, beliefs in ancestors, nemesis, and superstitions etc (Oto J. & Acham O.M. 2009:160) Infact, an identifiable feature of traditional healing in Africa and indeed in the Ilaje society is an obsession with the supernatural. Almost all illnesses are more or less attributed to the individuals’ relationship with the supernatural world. The healer’s communication with the supernatural is believed to have enhanced his ability to cure the illness. The diagnosis in this circumstance consists in ascertaining whether the illness is due to natural causes, and if otherwise identifying the supernatural forces involved (Bassey W.A. 1992:47) Given this backdrop, traditional medicine practices have been facing low level of patronage and disregard by some western trained elite.
Some deplorable problematic issues in the practice of traditional medicine in the area are proliferation and quackery. As there is no easy mechanism to check and detect these endemic acts, the rural people are therefore dangerously prone to the exploitative practices of the quacks and charlatans in the area. Also, in recent times, prayer and miracle houses with their ‘Prophets’ have found their way to the rural areas of this region where miracle cure is sought by the gullible as an alternative means or the last resort (Olatunde A. 2009)

These limitations of traditional medicine are obviously surmountable as are the limitations of western medicine. If one is made to complement the other, as both are equally relevant to good healthcare delivery, we would establish a medical care system that will take proper cognizance of all aspects of our health problems.

**Impact of Traditional Healing Practices on the Socio-Economic Development of the Area**

Nature has, in all her kingdoms, a remedy for every ailment, been it for beast or man (Bassey W.A. 1992:47) This is particularly true of the Ilaje littoral society. In this society, people, for centuries had found fish, roots, barks, leaves, seeds and all kinds of juices, which could aid in the treatment and healing of sick bodies, and in the restoration of normal bodily functions (Omoregha T. 2009)

Undoubtedly, the use of fish in traditional medicine has a lot of positive effects on healthcare delivery system in the society. The fact that a large proportion of the population in this society, prior to the introduction of western medicine survived the menace of various diseases, organized a vibrant society and participated actively in diverse economic, social and political ventures, including warfare is a strong indication that the area was inhabited by healthy and physically fit individuals (Ogungbare B.O 2009) This shows that the people, in the absence of western medical therapeutics, must have dependent mainly on traditional therapy during illness.

In recent times, traditional medicine practitioners started springing up in the area as a way of rejuvenating the ancient herbal culture with diverse, innovative and judicious adoption of fish in natural healing practices. This is perhaps for the fact that, it has been established that orthodox medicine is not omniscient (Ogungbare B.O 2009) Apart from providing employment and research base for the practitioners and the fishermen, traditional medical industry has been competing favourably with the orthodox practices. As noted, the opening of modern hospitals, (both private and public) in the area has not adversely affected the clientele of traditional medicine practitioners.
Indeed, the short fall between the needs of the population and what can be provided by the hospitals is provided by traditional healers and herbalists who consequently occupy a pivotal position in healthcare delivery in the society. In addition, traditional healers adopt both supernatural and biological therapies which make their methods more universal and gainful. There are cultural and spiritual health problems, such as infertility, protracted labour in women medically incurable sores, mental ailment, stroke, unabated bleeding, pile, etc whose solutions are beyond the realm of orthodoxy (Oluyitan J.A. 2008:208) There are instances in which persons suffering from these ailments are counseled by experienced orthodox doctor practitioners to return home for traditional therapy. In fact, cases of protracted, labour which are easily tackled by native doctors are being handled by orthodox doctors through caesarian operations. Consequently, adverse effects of surgery are reduced through the practice of traditional medicine (Mafimisebi A. 2009)

It is also worthy of note that traditional medical practices among the people and indeed other Yoruba groups are based on areas of specialization. There are; area of obstetrics (*ebigbigba*), gynecology (*inoghigo*), psychiatry (*ahinwinghigo*) and general practitioners. All these specialists are well valued and patronized by the local people and others from urban centers for their effective therapeutic skills (Mafimisebi A. 2009) The fact that herbal materials and products are cheaper than orthodox ones is not open to public debate. The prevailing economic problems in Nigeria and indeed in the Ilaje society coupled with the fact that herbal products are relatively cheap, readily available and reliable has also enhanced the patronage of traditional healthcare delivery in the area as well as other parts of Nigeria (Oluyitan J.A. 2008:208) Apart from the affordable cost, fear of caesarian operation associated with orthodox practice during protracted delivery often compels expectant mothers to prefer traditional obstetricians (*Ogbebi*).

In addition, many expectant mothers as well as persons with ailments claim to have preferred traditional medication as a result of the impersonal nature of orthodox nurses and doctors that often appear too officious or peremptory. The traditional midwives and gynecologists are accessible to their clients, speak local and familiar language and share same cultural experience with them. For instance, in the Yoruba and indeed Ilaje cultural belief, a child and its destiny are spiritually attached to the placenta (*ubi*) and as such, considerable care, sacredness and value would naturally be given to its handling and disposal (Adunke Sadare 2009) This is however not the case in the public hospitals and maternity homes. Moreover, there have been reported instances in recent times in Nigeria in which medical doctors in some public and private hospitals engaged in the sales of the placenta to ritualists.
This practice therefore scares many people and as such they prefer traditional healthcare delivery system. Given this backdrop, the socio-economic role of traditional medicine using fish ingredients (fishiotherapy) is immeasurable.

**Conclusion**

The introduction of the technical European type of medicine to Nigeria and other countries which already had their different cultural traditions, including medicine has resulted in a clash of values. Despite this, given the different cultural, philosophical and biological considerations of causes and management of ailments, a fusion and co-existence of traditional and orthodox folks would still enhance effective medical development in Nigeria, and indeed Ilaje land.

This study shows that trado-medical practices among the people have engendered medical progress with high degree of potency over the years. It also shows that in recent times, though with some limitations, traditional healing, using fish with herbs has been developed more ever than before in the Ilaje society.

This study also demonstrates that the functions of fishes and their derivatives in treatment preparations are wide and varied and are contingent upon geographical and cultural factors. This explains why the littoral Yoruba, such as Ilaje, Ijebu and Awori are very exposed to and proficient in medical uses of fish (fish therapy). Noting that there is an important nexus between the physical, emotional and spiritual fields in healing technology, the study therefore suggests a systematic marriage of the traditional health care system with the orthodox (tradothoxy) towards the promotion of good health care delivery in the area and indeed Nigeria.

This would represent a holistic approach in the medical practices of modern research investigations and treatment of patients. In doing this however, efforts should be made by individuals, associations and governments to encourage traditional healers and orthodox doctors to form national professional associations. Also, there should be organization of workshops to be co-facilitated by both the orthodox and traditional medical practitioners, involving the use of indigenous language and resource materials. Centers for scientific research into herbal medicine (comprising both orthodox and traditional healers) involving the study of the species of special fishes and plants of medicinal value should be established in the coastal region of the area. A stringent legislation should be made to check the menace of quacks, charlatans (both miracle churches and professional dupes) as well as unlicensed medical practitioners.
Ilaje society has a long time history of traditional medicine that has been growing in sophistication and efficacy. Much would be gained if adequate attention is given to integration of orthodox and traditional medicine, which is a worldwide emerging medical practice, it is hoped that these complementarities in healing would respond adequately to the complexities of the modern challenges in medical history.

References: