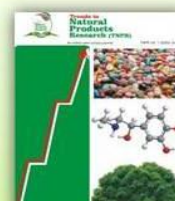


Trends in Natural Products Research



The Nexus Between African Religious Belief and African Traditional Medicine

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Abstract

The complex link between African traditional medicine (ATM) and African religious belief—a relationship that is ingrained in the spiritual and cultural fabric of African societies—is examined in this paper. The research explores the holistic view of health that is characteristic of traditional medicine, which links social, spiritual, and physical well-being. In order to address health difficulties, traditional healers use a combination of medicinal herbs, ceremonies, and divination. They play a crucial role as mediators between the spiritual and physical realms. The review also looked at the role that ancestors' spirits play in healing and the sacredness of medical knowledge that is passed down through the generations in certain societies. The difficulties and disputes associated with integrating traditional medicine with contemporary healthcare systems are also covered, including challenges with sustainability, rules, and moral conundrums. By means of an extensive examination, this research endeavours to illuminate the intricate workings of traditional medicine and religion in Africa, providing discernments into their capacity to augment holistic health and welfare.

Keywords

Africa, Divination, Healthcare system, Religion, Traditional medicine.

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This holistic method is based on the belief that supernatural powers have an impact on health and sickness, and it includes spiritual ceremonies and

Introduction

Deep cultural and historical relevance surrounds the relationship between traditional medicine and religion in African countries. The social and spiritual fabric of the continent is intricately interwoven with this relationship, which goes beyond simple health practices. The holistic approach of African traditional medicine (ATM) is inextricably related to religious activities and beliefs. It includes a variety of customs and activities, such as calling upon ancestor spirits, using medicinal herbs, and performing spiritual rites (Abdullahi, 2011). The incorporation of traditional medicine into contemporary healthcare systems is fraught with difficulties, despite its historical prevalence and importance (Akah 1999). Concerns include the preservation of medicinal plants, the licencing of traditional healers, and possible inconsistencies with contemporary medical ethics (Green, 1999). In addition, there is a dearth of empirical evidence about the effectiveness of traditional methods, and a framework that respects cultural heritage while guaranteeing patient safety is imperative (Peprah, et al, 2015). In order to comprehend the ramifications of this relationship for modern healthcare practices, this study will examine the intricacies of the interaction between traditional medicine and religion in Africa.

Search Methodology

An organized search was done in Web of Science, Scopus and Pub Med databases. The search focused on various keywords such as Religion and African traditional medicine, practice of African indigenous medicine, cultural practices, ancestral spirits and divination. Articles that did not give information relevant to African traditional medical practice were discarded. In this inter-relationship the following were identified to play a major role

1. Spiritual and Holistic Approach

African traditional medicine views health as a whole, taking into account social, spiritual, and physical aspects. This method is firmly based on the idea that a person's spiritual and environmental harmony are closely related to their overall well-being. As a comprehensive health system that encompasses manual techniques, exercises, spiritual therapies, plant, animal, and mineral-based medicines, and other practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs, traditional medicine is recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (World Health Organisation, 2019).

the usage of holy items. Often regarded as keepers of spiritual and cultural wisdom, traditional healers use a range of techniques to identify and expressing the belief that paranormal forces have an impact on both health and disease (Okpako, 2015). A range of techniques are used by traditional healers, who are frequently regarded as stewards of cultural and spiritual wisdom, to identify and cure illnesses. Among these techniques include spiritual invocation, the use of therapeutic herbs, and divination (Mbiti, 1991). In addition, the holistic approach highlights the role that social connections and communities have in the healing process. According to Gyasi et al (2015), communal rituals and collective healing practices are prevalent since it is thought that social discord may lead to physical and spiritual diseases. This viewpoint provides a thorough framework for comprehending health and illness by highlighting the connections between people, their communities, and the natural environment (Akah, 2008).

2. Diviners and Healers

Diviners and healers play a crucial role in traditional African medicine, acting as bridges between the spiritual and physical domains. These people are said to have either been called to a higher plane or initiated into a spiritual order, and they are frequently bestowed with unique knowledge and abilities. The capacity of healers to identify and treat ailments using a combination of medicinal plants, ceremonies, and spiritual guidance has earned them varied names throughout cultures, such as sangomas in South Africa and dibias in Nigeria (Ashforth, 2005). Healers in ATM can be grouped as Herbalists, Traditional birth attendants (TBA) or Traditional bone setters (TBS).

Herbalists

Herbalists are considered in TAM to have been given supernatural abilities or skills that allow them to utilise herbs in a unique way that is kept secret from the general public. This is due to the unusual way that medicines are perceived in Africa. African herbalists typically also perform the role of diviners in order to do this (Okpako 2015). The therefore produced medications are said to have profound impacts on the user's spirit and/or soul in addition to their physical body. From this viewpoint, herbalists are viewed as magicians and herbs as fundamentally magical concoctions. Herbal medicines often consist of formulae that may contain additional natural ingredients in addition to plants, such as minerals

and animals or animal parts (Akah 2008). Primitive creatures such as chameleons, pigeons, lizards, and tortoises are frequently used, in addition to bodily components including feathers, skin, blood, and hair (Akah, 1999, 2008). Additionally utilised are minerals including salt, clay, and stone. These treatments are often made by macerating them in hot or cold water, or in alcoholic spirits or palm wine. Depending on the condition or therapy's intended outcome, these cures can be employed in different ways (Okpako,2015). These encompass unconventional delivery systems like smoking and snuffing in addition to more conventional ones like oral consumption and topical administration (Akah, 1999). Many herbs have gained notoriety for being linked with specific disorders, such as *Vernonia amygdalina* (bitter leaf) for diabetes and *Azadirachta indica* (neem) for malaria, despite the fact that herbal remedies often promise to heal a wide range of ailments at once (Akah 2008)

Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs)

In most African communities, women give birth to their children under the supervision of traditional birth attendants (TBAs), often referred to as traditional, community, or lay midwives. Since many women give birth without access to trained medical staff, TBAs assist with the majority of births. Despite the availability of contemporary medical facilities in Africa, more than 58% of births occur at home, nearly twice as often as in hospitals (37% (Oshonwo *et al.*, 2014).

TBAs are often elderly, well-respected women in their communities, which makes sense. Since most of the women who patronise, them lack formal education, they are therefore highly trusted (Awotunde *et al.*, 2017). TBAs offer antenatal care, infertility therapy, management of suspected abortion, and baby circumcision in addition to their specialised duties throughout the delivery process and the crucial postpartum period. Most TBAs perform key duties in childbirth, although they also practise herbalism or other forms of traditional healing. In carrying out their responsibilities, they typically turn to traditional remedies and depend on customs to explain obstetric difficulties (Walsh 2006). In addition, they carry out customary rites and offer women the crucial companionship they require during giving birth. From prayers to sacrifices, these rituals typically reflect the religious atmosphere of the place in which they are performed. In addition, they consist of the mother's ceremonial bathing, the placentas' ceremonial disposal, and a postpartum hot water massage (Truter 2007). In addition to informal tasks like aiding with home chores, they typically offer social support in the form of helpful information on postpartum and cord

care, crucial assistance with nursing, and guidance on contraception.

Traditional Bone Setters (TBS)

Traditional bone setting is an ancient practice found almost in all communities in Africa. The traditional bone setter (TBS) is a lay practitioner of joints manipulation (Sina and Ayodele 2015), that is consulted most commonly for the treatment of fractures and dislocations (Thanni and Oginni 2000). TBS are reported to enjoy more confidence and patronage from people than any other group of traditional care-givers (Thanni and Oginni 2000). People only visit orthopaedic facilities when several traditional bone setting attempts have failed for an extended period of time. In certain regions of Nigeria, TBS accounts for between 70% and 90% of the treatment of fracture patients. The popularity of traditional bone setting is closely linked to the practitioners' claims of supernatural influences, just like it is with other varieties of TAM. Ancestral spirits are pleaded with through incantations and concoctions in order to obtain divine intervention and healing, in addition to the primary acts of manipulating the bones, applying splints to the area surrounding the fracture, and applying herbs and other healing balms (Owumi *et al.*, 2013).

Conversely, those who practise divination are experts in deciphering the mystical origins of illnesses and bad luck. To ascertain the spiritual aspects of a patient's illness, they use a variety of techniques such bone casting, dream interpretation, and oracle consultation. In order to satisfy ancestors or spiritual beings who may be having an impact on an individual's health, diviners are essential in determining what rites or offerings are required (Peek, 1991). The community's religious beliefs are intricately linked to the actions of healers and diviners. Invoking the aid of ancestor spirits or deities in the healing process is a common practice. The potency of their remedies is ascribed not just to their expertise in therapeutic herbs and methods but also to their ability to communicate with the spiritual world and harness its power for healing (Twumasi, 1979).

Diviners are experts in deciphering the spiritual underpinnings of illnesses and bad luck. The use senses other than the five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—to try and predict or comprehend the future or things that are concealed from the general public. Science or scientific ideas are not the foundation of divination, as it is not dependent on the senses. The scientific community typically disregards it as simple superstition since it depends on extrasensory perception, sometimes known as the "sixth sense" or supernatural agency. Because it is the diviner's responsibility to ascertain what the gods are thinking as well as to interpret and

apply it, this is an active process. So, diviners are not the same as the more passive seers and oracles, who only convey to their audience the messages they are inspired to convey by the "gods" or spiritual guides. Divination is important since it is used to identify the exact measures needed to cure the illness as well as its origin. Notably, though, oracles may also contribute to divination by including healing-related messages among their communications from the gods.

Numerous categories exist for divination. The most popular method connected to ATM is lotteries or the casting of sacred items, which can include beans, stones, sticks, bones, etc. African traditional religion uses a variety of artefacts as lots, according on the location, the individual, or the cult. These consist of cowrie shells, beads, crabs, and celestial bodies (Ndu *et al.*, 2022). Once the lots are cast, either onto a designated wooden board or platter, or just inside a circle marked out on the floor, the diviner interprets the results by interpreting the ensuing random distribution of the lots in accordance with certain unknown, well-guarded standards. This type of divination's central tenet is the conviction that a supernatural being is in possession of the sacred artefacts. To determine the spiritual aspects of a patient's illness, they use a variety of techniques such as bone casting, dream interpretation, and oracle consultation. When it comes to determining the rites or offerings required to satisfy ancestors or other spiritual beings who may be having an impact on an individual's health, diviners are essential (Peek, 1991). The community's religious beliefs are closely entwined with the activities of healers and diviners. They frequently entail calling on ancestors' spirits or gods for aid in the healing process. Their proficiency with medical herbs and methods is certainly important, but their capacity to connect with the spiritual realm and utilise.

3. Ancestral Spirits

Ancestral spirits are very important to people's everyday lives and spiritual beliefs in many African civilizations. These ghosts are said to be the souls of departed ancestors that still have an impact on the world today. Within the framework of traditional medicine, it is frequently held that ancestor spirits, based on their level of happiness with the activities of their living descendants, has the ability to either create or heal sickness.

African communities have diverse beliefs on the role of ancestor spirits in healing rituals. In certain societies, healers diagnose and treat patients by having direct communication with ancestor spirits. To consult the ancestors for advice on suitable treatments and to placate them if they are thought to be the source of the illness, they may employ ceremonies, offerings, or divination (Mbiti, 1991). It is also believed that ancestral spirits provide their

offspring spiritual power and protection. During sickness, people or entire communities may hold rituals in remembrance of their ancestors, asking for their protection and guidance on recovery. In these rituals, food and other sacrifices may be presented at ancestral shrines, along with libations and prayers (Gyekye, 1996).

The belief in ancestral spirits underscores the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual realms in African traditional medicine. It reflects a worldview in which the health of an individual is intimately linked to their relationships with both the living and the dead. By maintaining harmonious relationships with ancestral spirits, individuals and communities strive to ensure their overall health and well-being

4. Sacred Knowledge

Within particular families or groups, the knowledge of medicinal plants, healing techniques, and rituals is typically revered and guarded in African traditional medicine. This expertise is typically passed down through the generations, with spiritual and ethical principles instilled in addition to information being transferred from master healers to apprentices. This information has a spiritual obligation since it is considered holy, originating from the concept that it is a gift from the gods or ancestors. Usually, characteristics like spiritual calling, ancestry, or indications of unique ability are used to select healers. Becoming a healer requires a rigorous initiation procedure that frequently includes lengthy training, rites, and exams to make sure the apprentice is technically, ethically, and spiritually ready to continue the tradition (van Anel, Myren, and van Onselen, 2015).

There are several reasons why this knowledge should remain secret. By preventing their exploitation or abuse, it safeguards the integrity of the healing techniques. Additionally, it maintains the authority and prestige of healers in their communities because of the high regard in which their abilities and expertise are held. But this secrecy can also make it more difficult to incorporate traditional medicine into contemporary healthcare systems since it makes it harder to record and validate these practices through science (Quinlan & Quinlan, 2007). The significance of protecting and honouring this precious information is becoming increasingly apparent in spite of these obstacles. In addition to include traditional healers in healthcare initiatives and research, efforts are underway to record traditional medical practices. These programmes seek to close the knowledge gap between traditional and contemporary medicine, preserving the wealth of information found in African traditional medicine and incorporating it into a comprehensive strategy for overall health and well-being.

Integration with Modern Medicine

African traditional medicine's integration with contemporary healthcare systems is a subject of growing attention and discussion. The goal of this integration is to offer comprehensive healthcare solutions by fusing modern science and technology with the culturally sensitive and holistic approaches of traditional medicine. Acceptance and approval of traditional medicine methods are important components of integration. In order to control traditional medicine, a number of African nations have established guidelines for education, application, and the use of medicinal herbs. In order to facilitate the integration of traditional medicine into national healthcare systems, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has also produced recommendations. These guidelines place a strong emphasis on quality control, safety, and efficacy (World Health Organisation, 2002).

Another essential element of integration is cooperation between contemporary healthcare providers and traditional healers. There are several ways that this collaboration may occur, such as referral networks, collaborative research initiatives, and integrating traditional healers into public health efforts. Together, contemporary practitioners and traditional healers can increase patient outcomes, boost information sharing, and make healthcare services more culturally acceptable (Bodeker and Kronenberg, 2002).

Although there may be advantages, there are a number of obstacles to overcome in the combination of conventional and contemporary medicine. Conceptual framework discrepancies, questions regarding the scientific validity of customs, and problems with intellectual property rights and the commercialization of customs are a few of these. In order to overcome these obstacles, there has to be constant communication, respect for one another, and a dedication to coming up with solutions that uphold the cultural relevance of ancient healing methods as well as the scientific integrity of contemporary medicine (Green, 1999).

In summary, the amalgamation of African traditional medicine with contemporary healthcare systems has potential for enhancing accessibility to comprehensive, culturally-relevant healthcare treatments. A more inclusive and successful strategy for health and well-being in Africa and beyond may be developed by embracing the advantages of both systems.

Challenges and Controverses

There are disagreements and difficulties in integrating African traditional medicine with contemporary healthcare systems. Differences in cultural perceptions, scientific validity, legal

frameworks, and ethical concerns are the root causes of these challenges.

Scientific validation: A major obstacle is the dearth of scientific proof for the effectiveness and security of several traditional medical procedures. Rigid clinical studies have not been conducted on all herbal medicines, although some have been researched and found to be helpful. According to Sofowora, Ogunbodede, and Onayade (2013), the modern medical community may become sceptical and resistant as a result of this lack of scientific support.

Regulatory Frameworks: Significant obstacles include things like protecting intellectual property rights, certifying traditional healers, and standardising herbal compositions. In the event that all regulatory frameworks are lacking, there may be an increase in the number of unlicensed professionals and possibly dangerous activities (World Health Organisation, 2002).

Cultural Differences: There may be miscommunications and disputes as a result of the cultural contrasts between traditional and contemporary medical systems. The current medical method, which is more reductionist and concentrates on biological mechanics, may not be compatible with traditional medicine's holistic approach, which takes spiritual and social issues into account (Mbiti, 1991).

Ethical Concerns: Informed permission, secrecy, and the use of endangered species in herbal treatments are among the ethical concerns that arise when traditional medicine is integrated. Ethics dictate that treating patients with traditional remedies requires them to be fully educated about their nature and possible hazards (Peprah, *et al.*, 2015).

Commercialization and Exploitation: Due to the increased interest in traditional medicine, there are worries that indigenous knowledge is being exploited and commercialised. Pharmacies run the risk of co-opting traditional techniques without paying the communities that have conserved this expertise for centuries any reward or acknowledgment (Green, 1999). Promoting communication and cooperation between contemporary healthcare professionals, legislators, academics, and traditional healers is crucial in tackling these issues. Through collaboration, these challenges may be addressed and the potential of traditional medicine can be fully realised in a way that respects cultural history while being safe and effective.

Recommendations

In order to optimise African traditional medicine's potential and guarantee its seamless integration with contemporary healthcare systems, the following suggestions are put forth:

1. *Research and Documentation*: To confirm the effectiveness and safety of herbal medicines and conventional medical methods, support and financially contribute to thorough scientific study. According to Sofowora *et al.*, (2013), this will contribute to the contemporary medical community's increased respect for and confidence in traditional medicine.

Development of Regulatory

1. *Frameworks*: Establish regulations that safeguard intellectual property rights, certify traditional healers, and standardise the practice of traditional medicine. This will guard against the exploitation of indigenous knowledge and guarantee the efficacy and safety of traditional remedies (World Health Organisation, 2002).

2. *Collaboration and Dialogue*: Encourage cooperation and communication amongst contemporary healthcare professionals, legislators, researchers, and traditional healers. According to Bodeker and Kronenberg (2002), doing so will foster respect for one another as well as the integration of the best practices from the two systems.

3. *Cultural Competency Training*: Include instruction in cultural competency in medical education to assist contemporary healthcare professionals in appreciating and comprehending the cultural background of conventional medicine. Practitioners of both systems will benefit from improved communication and cooperation as a result (Peprah *et al* 2015).

4. *Sustainable Practices*: To guarantee the resources' long-term availability, encourage sustainable methods of gathering and growing medicinal plants. Maintaining the biodiversity and ecological balance of the areas from which these plants originate is essential (Green, 1999).

Conclusion

African traditional medicine and religion are closely related, which creates possibilities and problems for the fusion of traditional and contemporary healthcare systems. A more comprehensive and inclusive approach to healthcare may be achieved by recognising the cultural value of traditional medicine, establishing regulatory structures that assure safety and quality, and using scientific research to validate its methods. Improved health

results and the preservation of priceless cultural heritage can result from the respectful and cooperative partnership between traditional healers and contemporary healthcare professionals. In the

end, there is potential for improving the health of people and communities all around the continent through the incorporation of African traditional medicine into contemporary healthcare systems.

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