

## TRADITIONAL YORUBA MEDICINE IN NIGERIA: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

O. AWOJODU<sup>1</sup> D. BARAN<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *From the earliest beginnings of medicine, mankind has associated the act of curing disease with gods, goddesses and other forms of divine forces. Deities were greatly thought to be responsible for people's wellness and preservation of their wellness. Sickness was regarded as a consequence of disobedience to or sin against these supernatural agents and their moral rules. Concurrently, empiric medicine developed, mainly based on herbs, minerals and animal-derived substances, which were directly linked to the above mentioned supernatural elements. Spirits, gods and goddesses had tremendous effects on the early practice of medicine. Magical-empirical approaches to health and disease, still vivid today, characterized all archaic civilizations, being also identified in Nigeria. This presentation focuses on the significance of such comparable behavioural archetypes. An intercultural and transcultural insight into this early, yet classical, stage of medical practice in a tribe on the west coast of Africa - the Yoruba Land- is given.*

**Key words:** *magical-empirical medicine, transcultural archetypes, yoruba.*

### Introduction

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. [1, 2]

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. [4]

Traditional medicine, as is well known, represents a cultural gem of various communities around the world and encompasses all kinds of folk medicine,

unconventional medicine and indeed any kind of therapeutical method that has been handed down by the tradition of a community or ethnic group. [3]

In this study, emphasis will be more on the history of Yoruba medicine than on the actual practices and methodology.

A brief insight into these practices will put popular medicine into perspective before taking a more detailed look at its beginnings.

### Yoruba medicine and healers in Nigeria

Among the Yoruba in Nigeria, as in many African cultures, health and religion are tightly interrelated. In the Yoruba mindset, all healing comes from God, including that of the western medical

---

<sup>1</sup> Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> „Gr.T.Popa” University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iaşi, Romania

doctor. [3]

The Yoruba tribes believe in a power called *Ifà* which is God's angel thought to have been chosen to possess an infinite source of knowledge. *Ifà*'s knowledge includes animals, plants, oral incantations or *ofo*, divination, medicinal plants, and all sciences associated with healing diseases.

This "wise man to whom nature has taught her secrets" is the controller of language, culture, philosophy, and religion. *Ifà* knows the causes, secret names, origins, and chemical compositions of all things.

This Supreme Being gives the knowledge of healing through the power of *Ifà* to those who prove themselves worthy. [1, 2, 7]

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. [6, 7]

The feature most accepted by western doctors is herbal medicine. [7, 12]

Since the dawn of time, leaves, fruits, seeds and roots of plants were selected beneficial for the maintenance of health and cure of the ailments man suffered from.

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 ritual healings. Rituals are open to the public, as healing is seen as a group effort. [7, 12]

### **Orunmila and Babalawos**

#### ***Orunmila, the herbal healer***

In Yoruba medicine, the «*Ifà* Corpus» is considered the foundation of divine herbal medical practice. [13, 14]

It was revealed by the mystic prophet Orunmila (Orula or Orunla), about 4,000 years ago in the ancient city of Ile-Ife, now known as Yoruba Land. Orunmila taught people the customs of divination, prayer, dance, symbolic gestures, personal, and communal elevation.

He advised them on spiritual baths, meditation, and herbal medicine in particular. In Yoruba mythology, Orunmila corresponds to the «highly knowledgeable *Irunmole*», deity of destiny and prophecy.

He is recognized as "ibi keji Olodumare", i.e. second only to Olodumare (Almighty God) and "eleri ipin", i.e. witness to creation. Orunmila is the Orisha of divination, the Supreme Oracle, the great benefactor of humanity and its main adviser. He reveals the future from the secret of *Ifá*, is a great healer and those who ignore his advice may suffer avatars produced by Eshu. Also referred to as *Ifá* ("ee-FAH"), Orunmila personifies knowledge and wisdom and the highest form of divination practice among the Yoruba people. Orunmila carried *Ifà*, the wisdom of Olodumare, to Earth. [1, 12, 14]

A Yoruba legend explains that the first who practiced the art of herbal healing was Orunmila, whom God had endowed with this knowledge and skill. [3]

Orunmila is not *Ifà* itself, but he leads the priesthood of *Ifà*. He embodies the archetype of the civilizing and healing hero. [9, 10].

#### ***Babalawo, the diviner-priest***

Priests of *Ifà* are called «Babalawo», ie father of mysteries, or, for a female *Ifà* priest, Iyan *Ifà*. Babalawos possess an additional Orúnmila consecratio.

They divine and interpret for people the word of Orunmila, such as revealed by the oracle of *Ifá*.

Babalawos communicate with Orula and with the Yoruba pantheon. Orunmila («Orun-ni-mi-Ela»), whose name means

“only heaven knows the keys to my salvation”, is imagined as a sage. [1, 13, 14]

Babalawos can give the "Hand of Orula", known as "Ikofa" for women, and "Awofakan" for men and other various deities.

### **Orishas in Yoruba Medicine**

The Yoruba religion has a multitude of deities, the major of which are called Orisha. [1, 13, 14]

There are around 201 deities, thirty of which are commonly worshipped. In diagnosing illness, each one of the Orishas manifests interdependent physical qualities and herbal attributes, each affecting one another.

The Orishas stand for higher energies that govern living matter destinies, transcend sensory faculties, and intermediate contact with the supreme God, Olodumare. [12, 14]

### ***Eshu, the mediator and accomplisher***

Olodumare used the command known as "Ashe" (ase) to accomplish his assignments.

Eshu, Èsù or Elegbara,, his best friend, exerts this «ashe» to this day and will use it forever. Nothing, good or bad, can be done without Eshu, who mediates between humans, Irunmole and Orisha. Eshu is indispensable to man and Orishas.

As Irunmole, he carries sacrifices for whatever purpose to the appropriate quarters. [1, 2, 13, 14]

Èsù, Gateman of the Heavens, is prime negotiator between negative and positive forces in the body. He enforces the "law of being" and enhances the power of herbs.

He mainly acts on the sympathetic nervous system and is involved with all herbal effects.

### ***Osain, the herbalist, God of traditional medicine***

Osain is the other most important

Orisha in Yoruba medicine. Osain rules over all wild herbs.

He is regarded as the greatest herbalist who knows the powers of all plants.

The plants and herbs of Osain have their purely medicinal value as well as their magical value.

Some plants have to be gathered at certain times of the day or night, according to cosmic rhythms of sacred events. (2,3)

Osain is the God of traditional medicine and all of nature is at his disposal.

Without the necessary herbs provided by an Olú Osain, the consecration of an orisha would be impossible.

### ***Obatala, the creator and healer of humans***

Deity of Creation, custodian of the *Ifà* Oracle, Obatala is an alternative source of knowledge.

Creator of Human Form and Purity, he cures illness and deformities.

His priests are the Babalawos and his primary effects are on the brain, bones, and white fluids of the body.

Herbs he controls Body skullcap, sage, kola nut, basil, hyssop, blue vervain, white willow, and valerian are [4, 13, 14]

### ***Ogun, the iron like power of health***

Orisha of Iron, Ogun is the divinity of clearing paths, specifically in respect to blockages or interruption of the flow of vital energy at various points in the body, and he is the liberator.

Effects are on the heart, kidney (adrenal glands), tendons, and sinews. Herbs used are eucalyptus, alfalfa, hawthorn, bloodroot, parsley, motherwort, and garlic. [2, 12]

Ogun, Irunmole of war, of the hunt, iron or steel expresses the force of this deity who can be powerful or/and cruel. [5, 13, 14]

### ***Yemoja, the mother goddess***

Mother of Waters, Primal Waters, and

Nurturer, Yemoja symbolizes the amniotic fluid in the womb of the pregnant woman, as well as the breasts which nurture.

She signifies the protective energies of the feminine element, manifesting her specific effects at the level of the womb, liver, breasts and buttocks.

The medicinal herbs she governs are kelp, squaw wine, cohosh, dandelion, yarrow, aloe, spirulina, mints, passion flower, and wild yam root. [6, 14]

***Oshun, the goddess of feminine energy and hydrotherapy***

Sensuality, Beauty and Gracefulness, are personified by Oshun.

She is responsible for clarity and flowing motion and has power to heal with cool water. She is also the divinity of fertility and feminine essence.

Women appeal to her for child-bearing and for the alleviation of gynaecologic or obstetrical disorders.

She is fond of babies and is sought if a baby becomes ill. Oshun is known for her love of honey.

She acts on the circulatory system, digestive organs, elimination system, and women's pubic area. [6, 14]

Herbs consecrated to her include yellow dock, burdock, cinnamon, damiana, anis, raspberry, yarrow, chamomile, lotus, uva-ursi, buchu, myrrh, Echinacea.

***Shango, the god of masculine energy***

Kingly, virile Shango, associates with masculinity, fire, lightning, stones and magnetism.

This Great Warrior and protector transform base substances into pure and valuable essences.

He controls the male reproductive system, bone marrow, life force.

Herbs incorporating his virtues are plantain, saw palmetto, hibiscus, foti, sarsaparilla, nettles, and cayenne. [6, 14]

***Oya, the goddess of death and rebirth***

Guardian of the Cemetery, Oya is connected with Tempests, Winds of Change, Storms, and Progression. Usually in the company of her masculine counterpart, Shango, she is the deity of rebirth.

Things must die so that new beginnings arise. In the same way, disease must come, so that evil can be destroyed, enabling living beings to heal and be reborn to a new life. [9, 10]

Oya's effects are on the lungs, bronchial passages, mucous membranes. Herbs used for such pathologies are mullein, comfrey, cherry bark, pleurisy root, elecampane, horehound, chickweed. [6, 14]

**Intertwined archaic and modern medicines**

As in many other vivid traditional civilizations from Asia, Americas and Africa, modern medicine intermingles with popular concepts and therapies.

Nigeria is no exception. In a fascinating melting pot, local ancient African healing techniques combined not only with western scientific practices and theories, but also with different religious and magical approaches.

Archaic ethomedicine mixed up with Christian and Islamic perspectives to health and disease. In Cuba, eg, in the second half of the XVIII-th century, syncretism between the Yoruba cult and the Catholic religion resulted in the "Santeria". Santeria is similar to the «Rule of Osha» and expresses the oracular revelation mystery of *Ifá*. Even though an animistic system of beliefs and rituals, *Ifá* is a monotheistic religion with one God, creator of everything, with polytheistic worshipping rules. [6, 13, 14]

Every natural object is enlivened by a spirit, similar to angels and saints (Spanish: santo-saint; «Santeria»-multitude

of saints).

Potentiating the power of Ifà, the Judeo-Christian God bestows the knowledge of healing to those who prove themselves worthy of him/them. [12]

#### ***Eleggua, the trickster at the crossroads***

In Santeria, Eleggua is probably the most important of the Orishas for many practitioners.

He is a trickster, constantly testing people's character, waiting for them at crossroads. Without him, one cannot take advantage of opportunities, and the proper way in a given situation might not be easily found. Like Eshu, Èsù or Elegbara, Eleggua delivers sacrifices to the other Orishas.

Receiving Eleggua is the first thing any practitioner must do in the religion of Ifà-Santeria. Both the trans- Atlantic Slave Trade and the colonization of Africa, contributed to this evolution. [12]

#### ***Voodooon magic medicine***

Yoruba religion metamorphosed and different species of it emerged. One of them is Vodoun, Voodooon or Vodou, a mixture of Nigerian and Congolese Yoruba, Haitian traditional belief system, Catholicism, and even Freemasonry.

It is usually met in Haiti, South America, the Caribbean, and Central America. In Haiti, it is considered to have shaped almost every aspect of cultural patterns and health practices. Commonly, lower or peasant classes have recourse to Voodoo rituals. [8]

#### **Art of Advertising and Medical Ethics**

In countries, such as Nigeria, where traditional medicine encounters official „Western scientific medicine”, advertising the supremacy of ancestral healing systems becomes an important market strategy.

Herbal therapies are presented as

transformed and updated by nominated "pathfinders", "pioneers" and "pacesetter, each of them a "first among equals" personality, „the vanguard of the innovation”.

Herbs and popular remedies are described in accordance with current medical diagnoses and defined as capable of treating incurable diseases. Inherited etnomedical botany is „different and unique", an evidence based alternative to orthodox medicine.

The dominant „compare and contrast” propaganda labels hospital medicine negatively and performed by inhuman unprofessional practitioners.

If appealing to natural therapies: ".no doctor can sentence you to death" any longer. In traditional as well as in scientific medicine, market policies often infringes professional ethics and deontology.

Educated practitioners should be assisted in their endogenous expert roles of archaic techniques, whereas herbalists should become aware of the risks they take. [11]

Attention has to be drawn, indeed, not only to the ethics of orthodox practitioners, but of traditional herbalists and healers, too. Claims that Agencies for Drug Administration and Control, or Ministries of Health approved traditional herbal remedies and alternative or complementary practices always need critical examination. Charlatanism, ignorance and despair often go together.

#### **Discussion**

The Yoruba tribe is one of the largest tribe in Africa with an estimated 30 million people throughout West Africa.

The Yoruba medicine is Orisha (deity or spirit) based and closely associated with the Yoruba religion.

Therefore this presentation focused primarily on the Orishas that form the foundation of Yoruba medicine, in the

same way that Hippocrates addressed the Greek gods when solemnly swearing to assist his patients properly: "...and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses..." (Hippocratic Oath). [5]

Analyzing Yoruba medicine, numerous convergences with other cultures and medical systems are brought to light. Comparable archetypes are found. Magical and empirical medicines are closely related in everyday practices.

The Supreme Almighty God and derived divine entities are deeply involved in causing diseases, life and death. Gods and vital energies work together with priests, prophet-diviners and humans. Civilizing deities and heroes testify the fact that life, knowledge and health depend upon supernatural entities. [9, 10, 13]

Their course is strictly dependent on human moral behaviour and respect of the divine rules and laws.

Consequently, openness to medical mystical experiences has to be maintained. [12]

Undoubtedly, herbal medicine holds a place of choice in all archaic medicines that preceded and equally coexist with contemporary "evidence based medicine".

Ancient Asian, European and African medicines perfectly agree from this perspective. In ancient Dacia, too, herbal remedies were many and highly appreciated. [9]

Syncretism is another characteristic feature of cultures and civilizations. It can also be distinguished in the Yoruba medical tradition.

It occurs due to the likeliness of basic conceptions and practical approaches, which express common archaic religious principles and ancestral ideas about health and disease, life and death, destruction and rebuilding, essential intertwined realities.

Errors are thus corrected or mitigated, lest evil be eternal.

Yoruba medicine has recourse to gods

and goddesses, energies and vital forces, all able to produce and cure illnesses.

Beside them specific gods of medicine exist: Osain, the herbalist, God of traditional medicine and Obatala, the creator and healer of humans. Osain resembles Asklepios, a celebrated master of vegetal drugs in Ancient Greece, or to Zamolxis, in Dacia, - ancient name of today's Romania. [9]

Fathering Humans and Purity, Obatala recreates or reshapes human beings - body and soul-, as he cures disorders and deformities. Oya, the goddess of death and rebirth, teaches that getting rid of disease signifies killing evil and decayed matter, restoring robustness and welfare.

Death as a source of improved life is another mental archetype religions and related traditional civilizations share. (9,10) In many respects, the rich Yoruba pantheon reminds various North African, Greek, Indian or pre-Columbian mythologies: masculine and feminine elements complement each others, goddesses of beauty, grace and fertility rub shoulders with frightening gods of war and disaster. Ogun, Orisha of Iron, the cleanser that opens the paths, hints to Chinese and Indian energetic points, meridians and networks. The vital trajectories he surveys seem to ensure an enviable health condition.

As defined in a well known Romanian traditional New Year's wish for health, humans should become or maintain themselves "hard as iron, sharp as steel", able to "blossom like apple-trees" and roses all lifelong.

As in ancient Egypt and other pagan mystic beliefs, but also in Christianity, deities specialize in curing specific organs and diseases. [5]

Eleggua, the trickster at the crossroads, reiterates the role of Hercules, the Greek civilizing hero, healer and savoir. [5]

Tradition gives authority. Both human-

and divine-revealed testimonies keep hope alive.

Important ethical issues equally result.

The true relationship between disease and healing experiences and their spiritual and behavioural expression are still to be determined.

Hermeneutics should aim at the transformative potential of the experience of the world, at identifying the sacred and profane roots of magical and empirical medicine.

### Conclusion

The Yoruba tribe's members are convinced believers in natural preventive and curing medicine.

They are obvious critics of modern western medicine where problems caused by drug use and abuse are masked, whereas the person as a whole is largely neglected.

According to the medicine-men of Yoruba, if humans listen to their bodies, these bodies will provide them with the preparation and appropriate knowledge necessary to regain the balance with the Earth and cosmic environment.

Modern-day technology, innovations and education have, however, made a lot of impact on the herbalist and on the practice of traditional medicine in Yoruba Land.

The general populace now wants to compare the herbalist with the orthodox medicine general practitioner.

Herbalists have now to be encouraged to improve on the quality of their practice, to be stimulated to identify correctly the medicinal plants and other ingredients used in the preparation of herbal products.

They should be mindful of the sources of their raw materials and avoid adulteration and mystification, in an effort to ensure safe and efficient medicines.

The intercultural and transcultural approaches to Yoruba medicine display

interrelated mental and behavioural patterns.

### Reference:

1. Abimbola K., *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*, IAP, Birmingham, 2006, 90-129.
2. Ademulegun Z.A., *The Relevance of Yoruba Medicine Men*. In *Pub Health Rep Nigeria*, 1969, 84, 12: 1085-1091.
3. Babalola, E. O., *The Relevance of Herbal Medicine to the Practice of African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity in Yoruba Land*, Ekpoma JReIS, 2003, 5, 1: 103-110.
4. Babalola, E. O., *The Scientific Basis of African Traditional Medicine. The Yoruba Example*, Ekpoma JReIS, 2005, 6, 1- 2.
5. Baran D., *An outline history of medicine*, Ed. Tehnopress, Iași, 2007
6. Buckley A. D., *Yoruba Medicine*, Athelia Henrietta PR, 1997.
7. Danesi, Mustapha A., *Traditional Medicine in Africa*. In: Oluwole, S. B., Faluyi K., (eds.), *The Essentials of African Studies*, Lagos, 1998, 2: 143-163.
8. DeSantis, Thomas J.T., *The immigrant Haitian mother: Transcultural nursing perspective on preventive health care for children*, *JTranscult Nurs*, 1990, 2: 2-15.
9. Eliade M., *De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1980, 80 .
10. Eliade M., *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase. De la epoca marilor descoperiri geografice pînă în prezent (vol.4)*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2007.
11. Iroegbu P., *Harvesting Knowledge of Herbal Resources and Development of Practitioners in Nigeria*, *Indilinga: African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 2006, 5, 1: 32-50.

12. Olson J., Nkiwane S., Integrate for Efficiency: Traditional Yoruba Medicine in Nigeria, GS 218 Introduction to Africa, Colorado College, 2006.
13. Orisha Net, <http://www.orishanet.org/ocha.html>
14. Yoruba\_Medicine, wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba\\_medicine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_medicine)