

RETHINKING THE *PRIMITIVISM* IN YORUBA ETHNOMEDICINE FOR CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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Abstract

It has become a recrudescing cancer to blame failures in Africa on the concomitant effects of colonialism. When discussing traditional African medicine, it is not uncommon to find claims such as orthodox medicine have overshadowed traditional medicine and that government has not given traditional medicine its due recognition. Since independence, one will expect that alibis as this should not rear their heads. However, as a result of advancement in science and technology, traditional medicine is denigrated as being primitive, unscientific, and unorthodox. This work sets as its problem, the case of primitivism against Yoruba traditional medicine which has made gloomy and dimmed its relevance and effectiveness in contemporary times. In contemporary times, there is need to rethink African (Yoruba) traditional medicine towards rejigging and revitalizing it for sustainable health care delivery. This work critically examines the practice of Yoruba ethnomedicine and the accusation of primitivism against it. Beyond this, it advances way forward for its practice in the future in order to contribute to sustainable health care delivery. It employs the qualitative method of research using the critical, analytic and prescriptive tools.

Keywords: Ethnomedicine, Yoruba, Primitivism, Science and Technology.

Introduction

Sometimes ago, two medical doctors had a dialogue on a social media group that I belong to. They discussed Yoruba traditional medicine. The first said Yoruba herbs and medicinal practices are still as relevant and potent as they were in ancient times. The other, employing hominem responded that his colleague must have been missing classes in medical school to smoke, which has beclouded his reasoning. To him, by virtue of his training in orthodox medicine, he should know that traditional medicine should not be used because it is primitive. Both of them did not reach a compromise. Primitivism as used by the disdainer of Yoruba ethnomedicine is in a malign sense. To him and many others, primitive is a negative word which means useless, antediluvian, obsolete as opposed to modern and scientific. This encounter is the focus of this work. It aims to redefine the notion of primitivism as used to describe Yoruba ethnomedicine because it could as well connote a positive meaning. To critically examine the accusation of 'primitivism' against YEM, the work is divided into three parts. The first part is the clarification of pivotal concepts. The second part examines the nature of Yoruba

traditional medicine. The third part focuses on the notion of primitivism in Yoruba ethnomedicine to which certain limitations serves contributory factors. The last part suggests way forward for the survival of Yoruba traditional medicine in contemporary times.

Clarification of Concepts

Yoruba Ethnomedicine: Yoruba is a sub-Saharan language spoken by millions of people mainly in Nigeria. Yoruba is an ethnic group in the Southwestern and North central part of Nigeria. Just like other parts of the earth, Yoruba land is covered with vast forest vegetation of medicinal plants and trees which make indigenous medicinal practices part of the main occupation of the Yoruba people. As far back as people have been experiencing health cramps, they have developed means to combat it. Similarly, in the Yoruba traditional society, they have had to deal with health issues before the momentous development in modern medicine. This is because good health is a prerequisite for personal and collective development, hence the aphorism of the Yoruba that *Eni tó ní àlááfà, ohun gbogbo ló ní* (he who has good health has everything), *ìlera l'òdògùn orò* (good health is the antidote to poverty). Yoruba ethnomedicine denotes medical practices within the Yoruba cultural milieu.

Yoruba ethnomedicine involves the use of plants, barks of trees used for herbs, consultation of herbalists, mediums, local doctors and deities for solution to various illnesses (Borokini and Lawal, 2014:20). It comprises “herbal medicine, bone setting, spiritual therapies, circumcision, maternity care, psychiatric care, massage therapy, aromatherapy, music therapy, homeopathy and a lot of others” (Borokini and Lawal, 2014:20). In the Yoruba cultural ambiance, there are professionals who are skilled in the use of traditional medicine. They are referred to as *Onisegun* (Medicine Men) or *Elegbogi* (Herbs men). Those who are trained in the preparation and dispensation of herbs are called *alagbo* (Herbs maker).

Primitivism: Primitivism from the word Primitive is from the French word *primitive*. In Latin, it is *primitivus* derived from the word *primus*. Primitivism is capable of two meanings. First, it is the view that certain ancient practices are preferred. It can also mean that which is backward and antiquated.

Nature of Yoruba Traditional Medicine

Yoruba traditional medicine is tied to the apron strings of Yoruba culture and religious belief. No aspect of the Yoruba life is devoid of their cultural practices and religious beliefs. Existence in African understanding is a religious phenomenon; man is a religious being living in a religious universe (Mbiti, 1969:15-16). Omosade Awolalu opines that Yoruba medicine is in the realm of religion possibly with some evidence of magic (Awolalu, 1979:73). Ethnomedicine of any human group in Africa straddles both the seen and unseen worlds, such that, one cannot understand the ethnomedicine of the

Yoruba separately from the overall culture within which it emanates and functions (Ogundele, 2007:128).

Health disorders are believed to be caused by evil supernatural forces like witches, demons wizards, sorcerers, who are enemies of their host or as a punishment for evil done in the past. This implies that medicine can be used for the good of humanity as well as to inflict punishment on immoral persons (Magesa, 1997:189). However, this explanation may not always be true, illness are also of natural causes (Abimbola, 2006:82). It seem to be an alternative way of explaining biological malfunction in the body because of lack of sufficient knowledge of the workings of the human system. For instance, it might be claimed that evil ones are sucking the blood of a person losing weight as a result of malnutrition. With education, we understand better that health disorder may be due to certain unhygienic and inimical practices. Despite this awareness, in modern times, it is still believed that evil forces can cause the body of their prey to malfunction.

Traditional medicine is concerned with exterminating the root cause of a disease (Makinde, 1988:89). The medicine man can first ask the *gods* to know what the cause of the disease is and its treatment (Borokini and Lawal, 2014:22). Kola Abimbola refers to orthodox medicine as allopathic medicine while traditional medicine is homeopathic medicine. He writes that; "...allopathic medicine is preoccupied with getting rid of the symptoms, homeopathic medicine is more concerned with identifying the causes of the illness and disease in an effort to restore holistic balance in the biological system" (Abimbola, 2006:79). Traditional medicine restores not just physical stability but also spiritual wholeness. This shows that in Africa, traditional medicine is a homegrown medicine, in Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Zambia, majorly due to inaccessibility to orthodox medicine, the first line of treatment for people with one form of sickness or the other is the use of herbal medicines at home (Kayne, 2010:1). Hence, Yoruba traditional medicine is divided into curative and preventive medicine.

Curative medicine is the treatment and therapies administered to a patient with intent to cure the patient's medical problems. Generally, it involves the use of herbs, roots, leafs, seeds, salt, barks and host of others. Instances abound of these types of curative medicine and the ailment to which it is applied. For cough, Fadipe Nathaniel explains that the ingredients are sugar-cane cut into pieces, soft banana, and Shea butter. He adds that when these things are boiled in water, we have some kind of syrup which when constantly applied would give the patient some relief and eventually cure (Fadipe, 1970:295). Samuel Ogundele explains that high blood pressure can be cured by grinding or pounding between five and ten big bulbs of onions, with about an equal amount of garlic added with ginger. All these are put inside a half litre of honey in a container. This mixture is to be taken twice daily. He adds that another alternative is to squeeze fresh bitter leaves inside a container of some little quantity of water and then drink twice daily (Ogundele, 2007:132).

Preventive medicine is used as a shield against future attack. To prevent attack from the enemies and wicked ones, Yoruba people wear charms and amulets around their waist, some wear it as rings on their fingers. It can be buried as part of the foundation of a house or hung at the entrance of people's houses. All these are done to ward off evil and prevent the activities of the evil ones. Some people prepare concoction to drink which would be an antidote against poison and some use it as soap to bath. These mysterious powers that could be used to prevent ailment can also be used for evil ends, hence, we have bad medicine man and good medicine man (Awolalu, 1979:74).

There have been undeniable changes in the life of the Yoruba people. Christianity, Islam, education and the dawn of orthodox medical doctors have tempered with the wholeness of Yoruba traditional medicine (Fadahunsi and Oladipo, 2004:79-80). In spite the changes, belief in traditional medicine is still pervasive. Traditional medicine is still patronized by many rural and urban people because of its accessibility, enduring cultural and psychological values (Ogungbemi, 2006:7). Yoruba elites also consult herbalists and make use of traditional medicine. It now come in pills, there are established modern medicine firms where drugs are processed with African plants and herbs. Herbal soaps, herbal mouth wash, herbal drugs are advertised on the pages of the print media and mass media. Local midwives still handle child birth to a greater percentage as evidence that people in modern times still accept traditional medicine. The reason for this acceptance includes the fact that traditional medicines are not expensive unlike orthodox medicine which is expensive because of modern science and technology. Furthermore, traditional medicine can be prepared with or without supervision if one knows the required ingredients and method of preparation. Furthermore, traditional medicine still has the monopoly to cure certain diseases, like pile. Curing pile in Yoruba land can be successful by grinding a leaf called *efirin*, mixed with lime for the patient to lick.

Primitivism in Yoruba Ethnomedicine

Yoruba ethnomedicine is faced with diverse challenges that has made it easy to disdainfully describe it as primitive. The greatest challenge of Yoruba ethnomedicine is its dearth of a scientific method. By a scientific method, we do not mean that traditional medicine is not testable, it possess empirical knowledge. Science itself proceeds by falsification. Fadipe posits that; “the greatest gap in the Yoruba's knowledge and control of natural phenomenon is the lack of any technique for discriminating between the essential and unessential qualities of things; between what constitutes a thing as such and what are merely accidental properties” (Fadipe, 1970: 293). This connotes the inability to induce general principles from particular experiences. When a prescribed medicine expedite cure, all that the medicine man knows is that the combination of certain roots and herbs can cure certain deceases, he may not know the role each ingredient plays and the part of the body the medicine works on (Fadipe, 1970: 295). Owing to this absence of knowledge and explanation, it seem difficult to fully ascribe to traditional medicine the status of science. However, Solomon Laleye (2007: 165), contends that science is inextricably linked with culture because every scientific

innovation, before universalization, is first an attempt to respond to certain existential challenges of a people within a cultural setting. Yoruba traditional medicine is also an attempt to respond to the existential challenge of the Yoruba people health wise.

Another limitation to ethnomedicine is the secretive and esoteric nature of traditional medicine. Anyone who will be engaged in the business of traditional medicine has to go through the process of intensive training of about six years or more so as to understudy the methods, principles and rules of traditional medicine (Ogundele, 2007: 133). For instance, it is believed that one must not pluck a leaf for medicinal purpose before 6a.m and after 6p.m except one knows the incantation to chant. One cannot know the incantation without being taught. Certain healing processes like delivery of a woman who has had protracted labour that may require incantation is also esoteric (Ogungbemi, 2006:5). The intangible aspect of traditional medicine which cannot be verified and explained scientifically is a serious setback. Some religions see patronizing traditional healers as witchcraft or sorcery. The Christian, for instance, see the activities of the *oniseegun* as barbaric or dubious. This is obviously a contradiction with Christian religion because the holy book affirms that God created leaves and herbs for men to take care of their health. The activities of traditional healers are denigrated as a form of discredit to medicine.

Finally, the problem generally with Africans is Africans themselves. African people have played a major role in their underdevelopment because whatever is African is often seen as inferior. Inability to accept whom we are and what belongs to us is a form of 'internalized racism' (Falola, 2016: 8). Most Africans prefer whatever is foreign. This preference can be due to poverty as well, but most Africans fancy what is foreign to that which is local. Most people prefer Chinese herbal medicine, Indian herbal medicine to Yoruba herbal medicine. It seems that our mental and psychological temperament to traditional medicine is a limiting factors to its progress.

Given certain limitations like those identified above, traditional medicine is denigrated as primitive. The question remains that, is traditional medicine primitive? If it is primitive, how should this primitivism be understood to suit contemporary times and aid the survival of Yoruba traditional medicine? In the Merriam Webster's dictionary, a synonym offered for primitive is *backwards*. If Yoruba alternative medicine is described as primitive, it implies that it belongs to the category of those things that have been left behind in the process of cultural advancement and sophistication (Idowu, 1991: 109). Hence, what often comes to mind first on hearing phrases like 'primitive society' can be the ancient, crude and native society without development, to which the modern and developing society is preferred. This the same as the preference for orthodox medicine over traditional medicine because traditional medicine is seen as haphazard medical practices that are no longer sought-after. However, in a positive sense, primitivism can be seen as the opinion that life was better when it was close to nature.

According to Cyril-Mary Pius Olatunji (2010:14), "primitivism signifies a theoretical position that whatever is primitive is more authentic and necessarily better... In practical

terms, it manifests itself in having a preference for whatever is ancient, simple, savage, rudimentary, unsophisticated. Primitive here means antediluvian as opposed to modern, sophisticated or scientific”.

The first part of Olatunji's definition buttresses the position that life was better when man was close to nature. However, ancient, simple, savage, rudimentary, unsophisticated, antediluvian as employed in the second part by Olatunji are adjectives capable of pejorative meanings. Bolaji Idowu (1991:109), contends that, these words should not be used to describe any set of people in the world today. The definition of primitivism as offered by two dictionaries and Olatunji shows that the word is prone to derogatory nuance. Depending on the context in which it is used, it could be positive or negative.

Hence, when those who object traditional practices describe it as primitive; they mean it is antiquated. Bolaji Idowu (1991: 109) posits that the incongruous use of the word is as a result of the bias of the western researcher that whatever does not agree with the cultural and social patterns of the West is considered automatically as primitive. Corroborating this, Mary Adekson (2003:1), opines that Western researchers who investigate Yoruba traditional medicine view it as primitive and non-therapeutic because research conducted by Westerners lacks the cultural richness and depth required for such exercise. In Segun Ogungbemi's view, in the colonial mind, anything African is vilified as primitive in order to fortify their claim of racial superiority (Ogungbemi, 2006: 1). This shows that given the western attitude to African cultural practices, they can be inflexible in carrying out research on Yoruba ethnomedicine, hence, describe it, and the totality of the African culture that does not appeal to them as 'Primitive'.

Bolaji Idowu (1991:109), further accounts that “the anthropological or sociological use of the word 'primitive' has been defended on the ground that it only refers to that which is adjudged to be nearer in behavior or pattern to the original with reference to human race or culture”. To non-western researchers, primitivism connotes that which is desirable. Here, primitivism is understood in the positive sense. Primitivism in regards to YEM is not obsolescence; rather, it connotes originality, it implies that certain medical practices are homegrown, indigenous and African in nature. It means that the Yoruba people have a way of treating their ailments with resources in their natural environment and if it is the opinion that the old way of life close to nature is better, then primitivism in Yoruba ethnomedicine is the notion that in the face of orthodox medicine, traditional medicine is still relevant and potent. As part of Yoruba culture and religious belief, traditional medicine is still used alongside orthodox medicine.

Advancing a Future for Yoruba Traditional Medicine

Today, it is necessary to revive Yoruba ethnomedicine which is part of our culture and identity maker. According to Toyin Falola (2016: 150), given the shortage of facilities and misappropriation of resources, the reason why society have not collapsed is because old ideas that have not been discarded. Part of these old ideas is traditional medicine which further shows that culture is part of what makes a society.

One important step towards the survival of traditional medicine is education. Taking the example of the conversation between medical doctors, there are traces that they never had any training that pertains to traditional medicine. Ethnomedicine should be an important part of our education. The Yoruba child should be trained to learn names of local plants, their combination, usage and their dosages. More colleges of natural medicine should be established for training of practitioners.

To a large extent, revitalizing Yoruba ethnomedicine will be difficult without taking serious environmental ethics. With the deplorable state of the environment, it is difficult to find plants and herbs for treating diseases. As Olatunji Oyeshile (1998:159) avers, what African nation needs is a science that takes account of African culture and the physical environment. African environmental ethics takes account of the physical environment. In order to 'save the plant that saves lives' (Scot, 2010: 111-112) ecological stability is vital for reviving Yoruba ethnomedicine. There should be a revisit to African environmental ethics that does not exploit the environment. In African environmental ethics, utilization of natural resources includes measures of its preservation. Environmental ethics cannot be overlooked in creating an enabling and hygienic environment where local medicine will be produced. If natural resources are not conserved, the people, environment and survival of Yoruba traditional medicine may be at risk.

In a 21st century society, there is need for government intervention to aid the survival of traditional medicine such that it will be attractive to both rural and urban people. Reviving traditional medicine seem like a political war. To leaders who seek means to amass public wealth to themselves, developing traditional medicine is not the best means since developing traditional medicine may be less expensive compared to orthodox medicine. Government should release fund in form of capital or loans for producers of traditional products. Locally made medicine should be made available in modern hospitals and administered to patients if need be. All specially established clinics/institutions of traditional medicine should be registered under the government and government should ensure they meet up with the standard of best practices.

As part of measure towards reviving Yoruba ethnomedicine, Richard Oyelakin argues that, traditional medicine should not be integrated into orthodox medicine but developed on its own, it should be granted the autonomy to operate without unnecessary dependence on orthodox medicine (Oyelakin, 2009: 73). To him, a call for integration presupposes a sense of qualitative inferiority of Yoruba traditional medicine (Oyelakin, 2009: 81). On the other hand, Falola avers that rather than denigrate traditional medicine as primitive and irrelevant, it is better to seek the means of integrating it with modern medicine (Falola, 2016:150). Segun Ogungbemi (2006: 11-12), opines that traditional healers should make their esoteric knowledge available to orthodox practitioners since they aim at sustaining a healthy life and records should be kept to show their successes and failures.

Admittedly, the traditional healer is not a second fiddle to that of the modern medical practitioner because they seek the same end using different means. While science believes in empirical facts that are tested, traditional religion which is the basis of traditional medicine gives primacy to the spirit. The methodology of the modern practitioner is radically different from that of the traditional healer. For instance, the use of incantation to cause a particular effect. Given scientific principle, it is difficult to believe in this since there is no causal connection between words spoken and actions that follows. The primitivism in traditional medicine is exactly what makes it reflect the ancient culture of the people. Advocating that it should be integrated into modern medicine is tantamount to making it an appendage rather than an medical practice that can stand on its own. Yoruba traditional medicine is part of the culture of the Yoruba people that any modern medicine must recognize and acknowledge, hence, co-recognized (Oyelakin, 2009: 83). Whether Co-recognition or integration, what is desired is mutual acceptance of traditional and orthodox medicine in order to enhance sustainable health care delivery, productivity and global competitiveness.

Conclusion

Ethnomedicine has suffered the same bruises as other African values; cultural, religious, social and/or political. The work has examined the nature, practice and suggested means towards revitalizing Yoruba ethnomedicine which shows that improvement in health care delivery will not only come along western lines, it can as well be African in nature. Primitivism in relation to ethnomedicine connotes originality. It is part of the sociocultural life of the Yoruba which defines them as unique people. Although largely patronized by the rural people as a result of poverty and inaccessibility of orthodox medicine. There should be a change in this orientation, such that choosing traditional medicine will not be as a result of poverty but because of its effectiveness. In developing ethnomedicine, the government of Nigeria must avoid the illusion of ethnicity and intervene without political excuses as there is no doubt that Yoruba ethnomedicine can contribute to sustainable health care delivery in Nigeria writ large the world.

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