

INTERROGATING THE RELEVANCE OF INDIGENOUS ORGANIC FOODS AND PLANTS IN HEALTH SUSTENANCE IN THE ABAKALIKI AREA, EBONYI STATE, 1980-2023

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Abstract

Before the inception of modern drugs, people in the Abakaliki area derived their nutrition and health sustenance from organic food and plant-based medicines. In recent times however, the use of chemicals for food production and preservation has caused a radical shift in the behaviour of plants in their natural habitat and in the human body. Ultimately, organic food becomes inorganic thus deteriorating people's health instead of improving it. This study focuses on the healing potency or otherwise of good nutrition in the Abakaliki area. The stages of change model of health provide a theoretical framework of analysis for the study. The work is derived partly from literature focusing on plant behaviour and also from oral interviews gathered from botanists, healers and individuals. On the whole, the study analyzes the impact of plant behavior on the health of Abakaliki residents and makes suggestions for its sustenance.

Keywords: Phytopsychotherapy, Organic Nutrition, Health, Herbs, Drugs.

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the most basic needs of every individual are food, clothing and shelter. Undoubtedly, much of these needs are sourced from plants, particularly food and clothing. Furthermore, the intrinsic desire of every man is to be healthy at all times, and food is crucial in the endless pursuit for sound health. Recourse to modern hospitals when health issues arise, has become the norm in Nigeria owing to modernization, the aftermath of western colonialism. Nonetheless, the importance of organic food for sound health *ab initio*, and as a healing therapy in the event of sickness can hardly be exaggerated. For the purpose of clarification, the word "organic" as defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary means farming methods of food produced or practiced without using artificial chemicals.¹

Darja *et al*, referring to the European food production regulation defines organic production as "an overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes".² Researches have shown that modern foods and medicine which are alien to Africans are primary causes of body weakness, frequent breakdown in health and diminished longevity among Africans. The concept of phytopsychotherapy,

otherwise known as plant behaviour has become a necessary study in Abakaliki area as a wake-up call for the people to reverse to their roots in African foods and plant-based nutrition as a means of preserving health and prolonging life.

Platkin *et al* conceived some definitive phrases that speak of the use of food for prevention and treatment of diseases. These include, food is medicine, culinary medicine, culinary nutrition, medically tailored meals, medically tailored groceries, medically tailored food packages, food for health, nutritious food referrals, prescription fruit and vegetable programs, and many others. They stressed that there had been several occasions where specific diets proved more efficacious at treating some diseases especially at the early stages. Researches have shown that drugs may have to be combined with a healthy meal for a more positive outcome.³ Thus, phytopharmacology which largely focuses on the behavior of plants with respect to stimuli will become useful for the choice of groceries and agricultural inputs to safeguard the healing potentials of plants.

C. Mbamara advanced the concept of phytopharmacology which he defines as the branch of psychology that deals with the study of plant behavior and inner processes. He further observes that the behavior of plants are those overt actions of plants that can be visibly observed while the “inner processes” are the feelings, desires and needs of plants that are not empirical.⁴ “Phytopharmacology” was further broken down by E. Ogazi who defines “phyto” as the beneficial mineral elements or nutrients contained in plants. These control human emotions and behaviour. In his words, “the phyto nutrients are there in plants to help provide to the body, the phyto needed for your psycho, your behavior.” In other words, minerals and nutrients inherent in organic plants control human emotions and behavior. Aply, phytos control psychos. Speaking of the inner processes of plants which include their feelings, desires and needs, Ogazi curiously submitted that plants feel pain during cross-pollination when they are stung by bees. A simple means of alleviating their pains was to “feed” them with Vitamin C from oranges.⁵

Theoretical Assumption/Explanation

This study could be explained by the Stages of Change Model of health developed in 1992 by J. Prochaska and C. DiClemente. The Stages of Change Model (SCM) illustrates people’s impulse and willingness to change a health-related behaviour. This varies between individuals over time.⁶ The motivation in this case is the failure of modern medicine to completely address health issues. People’s interminable desire for sound health at all times can spur a change in health-related behaviour where conventional means fail. Additionally, the constant witness of sound health, healing and longevity among folks who mostly eat local food can inspire a reversal to organic food especially where conventional food constantly jeopardizes health. Cases abound where orthodox medical practitioners prescribe a change in the food habit of patients to facilitate healing. Traditional healers also combine herbal treatment with organic food for holistic healing. As presupposed by the Stages of Change theory, the needed motivation for a change in culinary behavior exists at all times among Abakaliki people. Prochaska and DiClemente divided behavioural change into five stages including pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance. Observation of all or some of the five stages may be determined by the patient or caregiver based on the severity of the health situation.⁷

An Overview of the Abakaliki Area and Nutritional Medicine before 1980

Abakaliki area basically comprises communities in eight Local Government Areas found in today’s Ebonyi State. They include Ohaukwu, Abakaliki, Ishielu, Ebonyi, Izzi, Ezza North, Ezza South and Ikwo. These currently occupy Ebonyi North and Ebonyi Central Senatorial Zones. The choice of the geographic scope, is informed by the largely

traditional outlook of the area coupled with the popular agrarian profession of the inhabitants. The abundance of arable land for farming, which gave room for shifting cultivation naturally replenished the soil keeping it ever fertile and rendering fertilizers and other chemical inducements for increased crop yield unnecessary. Against this backdrop, organic nutrition became a norm among the people during much of the time scope of this study.

The adage which says “you are what you eat” emphasizes the profound effect of healthy nutrition on human health.⁸ Notably, the use of food as medicine began as early as 300 BCE when food crops were cultivated for medicinal purposes. Then, food was eaten as medicine and as preventive medicine in Asian countries. Health practitioners taught people the best way to live their lives and how to consume food in order to avoid falling ill.⁹

Similarly, Yeung, Jr. and Catanzaro, suggesting an optimal elimination diet for patients with Endometriosis, explained that while the disease have no known cure, a gluten-free diet can exterminate it over time. Meanwhile, gluten has been described as:

A protein found in grains and wheat products which has been shown to cause diarrhea, abdominal pain, and bloating in women with gluten sensitivity. Gluten can cause malabsorption of vitamins and minerals that regulate hormones. Gluten, also can cause inflammation and induce autoimmune reactions that attack hormones and hormone receptors.¹⁰

They stressed further, that the central objective of an elimination diet is to remove all foods that may worsen the health condition of a patient.¹¹

Specialization hardly exists in the practice of healing with phytos (plants/herbs). This fact is seen in the case of M. Nwachinemere. Emanating from a pedigree of longevity, she shared that her grandmother died at the age of a hundred and fifty years (150) and her mother died by road accident at the age of ninety-five years (95). In the pre-1980 years in Abakaliki area, culinary medicine was more of preventative treatment rather than curative.¹² This goes to show that before 1980, Abakaliki residents for the most part, maintained their health and actually treated diseases mostly with the right organic food. Ubah who was above seventy and still very strong at the time of this study, asserted that as people advanced in age, their diet should necessarily tend towards local organic food and drinks such as *ukwa* (breadfruit), *ugba* (oil beans), *mmanya ngwo* (raffia wine) and plenty of vegetables.¹³ As a matter of fact, before 1980, consumption of organic food was the norm in the Abakaliki area. Their domestic animals roamed free and fed on their natural food. This made them very healthy for consumption. Moreover, the people practiced shifting cultivation which naturally replenished soil nutrients, making artificial inducements for high crop yield unnecessary. With such natural conditions for organic food production in place, people in the Abakaliki area lived amazingly long lives, sometimes above hundred years.¹⁴

In the Nkalagu area of Abakaliki, people consumed much of a vegetable locally known as *uchakuru* (*Liberica/Cintrograss*) which is believed to be potent for the prevention and cure of diabetes, it was said to reduce cholesterol and keep the body strong. The Nkalagu people were predominantly farmers who worked till they grew very old. Perhaps this explains why their age is hard to tell, given that age hardly tells on them. They also claimed to treat pile and diarrhea by squeezing out and drinking the juice from another vegetable, *uturukpe* (*Humid plant/terocata*).¹⁵

FIGURE1



FIGURE2



1. *Uturukpe* leaves (Humid plant)
2. *Uchakuru* leaves (Humid plant) Source: Researcher's fieldwork

Some people in the Abakaliki area lived till the age of seventy and above, and still maintained healthy eyes. In fact, they could see and read clearly. The palm wine which is popular for its high yeast content was largely responsible for those healthy eyes. But yeast-enriched palm wine was not the only means of maintaining healthy eyes. A seventy-four-year-old (74) source who maintained crystal clear eyes asserted that his eyes stayed healthy despite his age because from childhood, he consumed plenty of vegetables which he ate raw or half cooked. Additionally, his vegetables were never cooked twice. His late grandmother who raised him also avoided carbohydrates-rich food and concentrated much on vegetables. He formed the habit of opening his eyes inside a bowl of water a number of times before going to bed every night and with that habit, age had no effect on his eyes.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, people in the Abakaliki area have largely maintained their organic lifestyle beyond the 1980s, but ever since, chemical impositions on phyto had greatly undermined the healthy status of the natural food consumed by the people.

Organic Foods and Plants and their Impact in the Abakaliki Area, 1980-2023

Hippocrates, the renowned Greek physician is famous for the popular maxim, "let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food."¹⁷ To some extent, the concept of phytopsychoLOGY drew inspiration from that statement. The Abakaliki area is generously endowed with perennially fertile soil, a key factor in the people's central occupation which is farming. In view of this fact, the bushes, farmlands and gardens are crammed with a myriad of organic plants for consumption and for medication.

Arianfar and Sardarodiyani defines organic food as one which came from organic soil and without the use of fungicides, pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. They advocate "green

marketing” which encourages consumers to buy environmentally friendly food. This is why people generally perceive food labelled as organic or natural to be healthier for consumption.¹⁸ The awareness of organic food for health is as old as the people of Abakaliki. However, the concept of phytopsychotherapy as developed by I. C. Mbamara became popular from the 1980s.¹⁹ He believes so much in the healing power of plants and thus noted that “Paracelcius was so adept at herbal use that he stated truly that for every ailment of man, there is an herb that grows”²⁰

Mbamara found inspiration in his mother who died in 2016 at the age of a hundred and thirteen years (113). He also observed that people were dying from preventable diseases. Drugs were available but they fell short of people’s expectations for premium health and total healing. He sensed that something was habitually wrong in the consumption pattern of the populace and discovered that it was the absence of natural ingredients in people’s daily food. They were building their bodies with artificial impositions, suppositions, activities and materials that impact negatively on the body. In sum, people were eating more of artificial food than natural food. Thus, his central purpose for proposing the concept of phytopsychotherapy was to heal people completely.²¹ The high patronage of fast food business outfits may be responsible for this trend. Conventional foods are known to be a threat to people’s health due to the presence of heavy metals in them²² A Minnesota healing center defined nutritional therapy as a program which “aims to address symptoms and various conditions by examining and changing lifestyle factors and dietary habits.” It therefore uses the intake of nutrients and prescribed lifestyle changes to prevent and treat various diseases.²³

Out of ignorance of the organic status of the food displayed in the market, people in the Abakaliki area might procure inorganic vegetable or food. That is, one grown with chemical fertilizer, pesticides and other chemical substances. Nwachinemere shared that such chemical-induced foods are more perishable than the organic ones.²⁴ In agreement with Mbamara and Nwachinemere, Yeung, Jr. & Catanzaro maintained that some pesticides reduce the antioxidant capacity of plants and vegetables.²⁵

With regard to the deleterious impact of chemically induced plants and livestock, Nwachinemere advised against the consumption of the common eggs sold in the market. This is because, they are products of chemical feeds that induce chickens to lay eggs in large numbers. The health hazards associated with them are too numerous to mention. For instance, Nwachinemere stressed that too much consumption of the feed-produced eggs and chickens often led to blockage of the fallopian tube and early menopause. She shared that this gynaecological issue was quite common among her patients in the Abakaliki area.²⁶ The need to feed a growing population, coupled with the quest for easy wealth is responsible for the proliferation of chemically induced plants and livestock²⁷ even in the Abakaliki area.

Mbamara affirmed that malnutrition was a major cause of diseases among people in the Abakaliki area. He emphasized that:

When you eat well, the body chemistry is well balanced and suffers less diseases, conditions and problems. So nutrition has played a very pivotal role in controlling and maintaining human health...Fertilizer is a chemical that helps plants to grow faster and fatter, but there is something naturally associated with such plants, they cannot give you the natural ingredients that organic plants can give you. They look quite attractive, but are only artificial food even though they appear natural.²⁸

A 2021 study revealed that there is a difference in the nutritional and health status of

organically produced food and the conventionally produced one. For instance, organic crops contain a higher concentration of Vitamin C, magnesium, iron and phosphorous than conventional crops. Additionally, the risk of obesity is about 31% higher in people who consume conventional food than those who consume organic food.²⁹ On this basis, cases of obesity were almost non-existent among most rural inhabitants in the Abakaliki area.³⁰

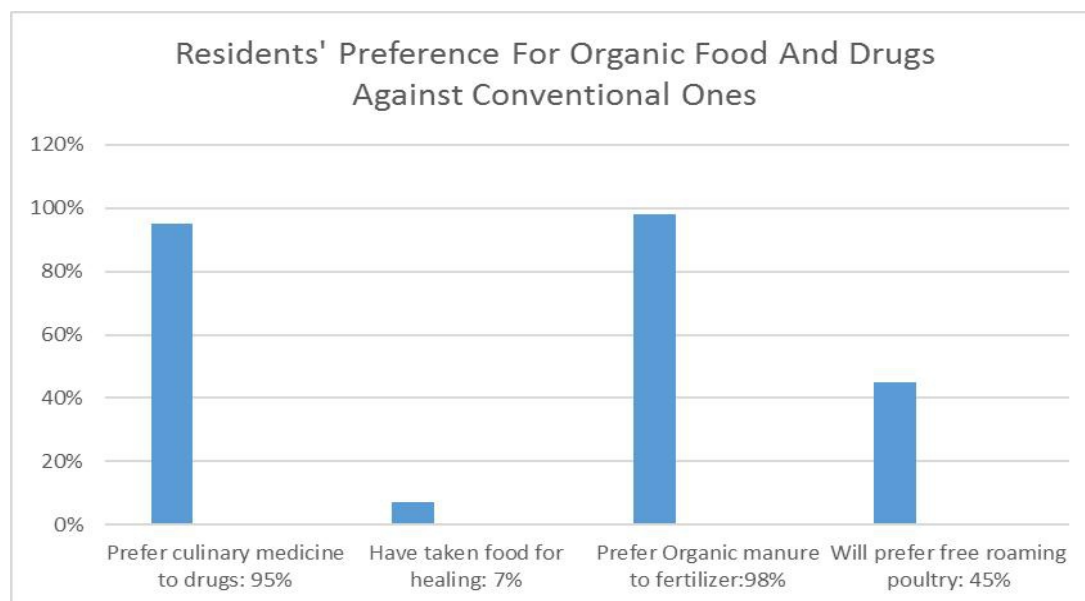
E. Ogazi offered a solution to the chemically induced livestock by feeding his own with Plaster of Paris (POP) which he processed himself with organic materials. It contains hydrogen sulphide and its function was to hasten the growth of the animals while burning out the excessive fat in their bodies. He maintained that these were much healthier for consumption than conventional livestock. Ogazi who runs a botanical garden in Abakaliki, treated most diseases (except prostate cancer) simply with organic food. He perceived that the use of chemicals in food production were unnecessary given that soil fertility is continuously replenished through the natural activities of man. Human and animal droppings, disposed thrash and even dead bodies buried in the soil were natural agents that constantly refreshed the soil. However, impatience with nature push many in the Abakaliki area to resort to fertilizers nonetheless.³¹

The Global Wellness Institute recognized that it is quite difficult to change food habits, particularly where people always craved tasty processed food. Where constant consumption of such foods alongside increased alcohol intake and insufficient exercise became prevalent, the inevitable outcome was chronic diseases such as cancer, stroke, heart disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases and many others. Conversely, these diseases could be reversed or healed through imbibition of the right nutrition;³² hence the employment of nutritional therapy in treatment by both modern and traditional health practitioners. Interestingly, Darja *et al* notes that pesticides impair the immune system causing infertility in both men and women. They also lead to the development of tumors.³³

Disease Treatment with Organic Food and Herbal Drugs: The Nexus

In recent times, diabetes has become quite frequent among the new generation of Abakaliki residents possibly due to the growing penchant for conventional food and pastries. This is to be expected following the proliferation of Eateries in Abakaliki town. G. Ubah disclosed that about 35% of his patients were diabetic cases. While treating with herbal medications, he also prescribed sugar lowering diet for his patients. To this end, a diabetic patient must necessarily avoid starchy food such as sugar, pastries, *garri* (cassava flakes), rice and alcoholic drinks. He also advised them to concentrate on bitter, non-sugary food, and they must drink *mmiri olugbu* (bitter leaf juice) all to beat down their sugar level and expedite healing.³⁴ But Nnabuike, E. was strongly opposed to the use of bitter leaf juice for diabetes treatment. Rather, he advised the use of *utazi* for diabetes treatment. His doctor advised him to avoid *olugbu* (bitter leaf) because of its acidic content which is believed to have damaging effect on the kidney.³⁵

During a survey of a hundred and four (104) persons in the Abakaliki area, a larger number preferred organic food for healing rather than drugs but only very few had taken food as treatment for some ailments. For example, people drank the juice from the garden egg leaves as a potent blood builder. Additionally, there were those who would rather cultivate their crops with organic manure instead of synthetic fertilizer.³⁶ This fact is graphically illustrated below.



Source: Researcher's fieldwork.

A source shared that he had treated himself for malaria several times simply by eating some pawpaw fruits. Whenever he did, the symptoms would vanish few minutes afterwards. However, admitted sometimes the symptoms resurface some two weeks later. The import is that pawpaw may relieve malaria symptoms but may not heal it completely. Meanwhile, Abakaliki people believe the mushroom is a potent remedy for cancer. It works by fortifying the body immune system to fight against cancer cells and halt their growth. Nnabuike E. believed that mushrooms were recommended for cancer patients for this reason.³⁷ Nwachinemere affirmed that she had treated several HIV cases also with the mushroom. The water resulting from boiling the mushroom for some minutes would be drunk by a patient from about three months to one year as an HIV remedy.³⁸ Another effective remedy for cancer, as reported by Nnabuike is the soursop whose fruits and leaves hold preventive and curative capacity for cancer treatment. The soursop, also known as the porcupine fruit is equally claimed to be a remedy for low sperm count and hypertension.³⁹

Barchitta *et al* posits that malnutrition is a major risk factor that impair wound healing and the repair process of the body.⁴⁰ Hence, some healers often advise steady consumption of foods rich in vitamin C during treatment of chronic or cancerous wounds.⁴¹ This supports Builders and Builders who noted that products containing *hibiscus sabdariffa* (*zobo*), Aloe Vera and honey have been used massively for wound care and with excellent results.⁴²

Some people believe that the water which springs from the soil profile in a deep well

possesses miraculous healing powers.⁴³ This affirms the statement that “there is power in nature.” Thus, a holistic treatment and cure may require an admixture of modern procedures, culinary and herbal medicine, plus spiritual backing with prayers.⁴⁴ Indeed, nutritional and herbal treatment could hardly be isolated from modern medicine especially in contemporary times. Between 1940-2002, natural herbs had been used in China in the development of new drugs. Chinese scholars conceived that phytos possess a unique chemical diversity which lead to a diversity in their biological activity and drug-like capacities. This knowledge led to the utilization of phytos in the production of modern drugs. In a 2016 study, it was revealed that 54% of anticancer drugs made within the said period were derived from natural herbs and from 1981-2002, 64% of antihypertensive drugs produced in China were made from natural products.⁴⁵ Concurrently, Ubah asserted that most modern drugs were made from herbs and so he combined both in treatment. He asks his patients to provide laboratory test results before he commenced treatment or in the course of treatment to check healing progress. For cancer treatment, Ubah would advise his patients to eat plenty of fruits such as the cashew fruits and cashew nuts, *unere nwanishi* (short bananas), *udara* (African apple) and other fruits. He warned that chemically modified fruits must be avoided.⁴⁶

Phytos and Food Supplements: A Shift in Nutritional Medicine

In recent times, food supplements have gained wide traction in Abakaliki as a result of the increased awareness of their healing effects on severe ailments. Several individuals claim to have received total healing from their ailments after using some foreign supplements. The numerous claims of healing leaves little doubt about the prohibitive health value of the supplements. The most prominent ones that have thrived in the Abakaliki area Ed Mark, Longrich and SuperLife Total Care (STC).

An oral source who is a major distributor for the Malaysia made SuperLife, claimed that many people who consumed the product were totally healed of several ailments. As many people in Abakaliki area and beyond had testified to the healing potency of the product, its popularity continued to grow. The general belief among the users was that it is not a food supplement, neither is it a drug. It is rather a health therapy that induces the body to heal itself. It is made up of stem cells which have been described as the mother of all cells and could build any cell in the body. In other words, it heals by regenerating damaged cells and tissues in the body. Thus, several patients with large tumors such as fibroid had received total healing through the consumption of the SuperLife Total Care (STC).⁴⁷ But this claim was debunked by Ubah, who maintained that fibroid could only be healed with nutrition and supplements at its early stage. When the tumor had grown very big, no amount of organic nutrition or supplement can remove it, but only a medical surgery.⁴⁸ Mbamara affirmed this fact as he reported that he had advised some of his patients with enlarged fibroids to forget herbal treatment and just go for surgery.⁴⁹

The United States Food and Drug Administration maintained that dietary supplements are generally made up of vitamins, minerals, amino acids, herbs and botanicals that are meant to supplement the daily meal and not to heal diseases.⁵⁰ Obviously, Longrich, Ed Mark and SuperLife products fall among this category of dietary supplements as they enhance the body's immunity against diseases.

Supportive Therapies to Culinary Medicine

Some traditional healers in the Abakaliki area believe that happiness is key to the effectiveness of culinary and herbal medicine. People easily get old and shriveled when they allow negative emotions to take undue advantage of their lives. In other words, negative emotions easily undermine the healing effect of organic food. Aside from

happiness, faith in the healing power of the prescribed food and drugs is crucial for total healing. In other words, a patient must believe that the drug, food and therapy prescribed have the capacity to heal his ailment; otherwise, healing may not take place. Moreover, some healers advised their patients to take their meals at certain periods of the day for maximum health benefits. In this regard, some patients were advised to eat medically tailored meals at least four times daily at 7 am, 11 am, 1 pm and 7 pm respectively. This was often accompanied with lots of water to ensure that the stomach was never empty. An empty stomach was believed to be a breeding ground for diseases.⁵¹

A distinctive attribute observed among the practitioners in the field of culinary and herbal medicine is the trajectory of longevity. For the most part, they came from a lineage of parents who lived amazingly long lives purportedly as a result of continuous intake of medicinal food. Obviously, one who takes care of others' health should of necessity, radiate health. It seems that the numerous causes of frequent diseases and premature death is summarized in one word, "ignorance". It can as well be deduced that the practitioners exhibit a high level of honesty. They never claimed to be or have the lasting solution to every ailment they encounter. Cases abound where patients have been advised to go for surgery for removal of enlarged tumors which have grown beyond herbal medicine. In retrospect, Mbamara and Ubah had referred a number of patients with critical cases to the hospital. Ubah also admitted that while he remained a successful trado-medical doctor, there are cases that have defied his expertise. Whenever he came across patients whose health issues had defied both modern and traditional medicine, he would advise them to "go home and rest."⁵² Numerous treatment failures have equally been perceived in orthodox medicine. In fact, many who patronize unorthodox medical treatment, do so out of frustration with conventional treatment. Eze *et al* notes that

Just as there were herbal medicines with doubtful efficacy, so were some allopathic drugs in the treatment of underlying causes of some diseases. In other words, treatment failures were not peculiar to unorthodox medicines as western medicines were also known to have exhibited the same phenomenon...orthodox medical practitioners look forward to only between 30 and 35 percent success rate for the efficacy of their drugs.⁵³

Ubah stressed further that diabetes could be very delicate when the sugar level of a patient is astronomically high, such as 500%. When confronted with such a case, he always referred the patient to hospital where the sugar level can be trickled down speedily with insulin injections. Sometimes, the patients returned to his clinic to continue the treatment with herbs and food.⁵⁴

Conclusion

This study can be perceived as an analysis of a fusion of culinary medicine, herbal treatment, food supplements and supportive therapies that prevailed in the Abakaliki area within its scope. The importance of regular consumption of organic food could hardly be overemphasized. In conformity with the concept of phytopsychotherapy, organic farming styles that maintain the natural status of food is also imperative. It may be deduced that food and diet have the capacity to restore strong health.⁵⁵ In fact, Mbamara posited that there is currently a revolution going on in the realm of healthcare resulting in greater acceptance of phytos in mainstream medical circles. This is no surprise as there is now a firm scientific evidence of the efficacy of phytos in maintenance of health. This fact is seen where modern doctors and traditional healers often prescribe phytos such as vegetables, fruits and nuts for their patients.⁵⁶

Instructively, the attainment of health and longevity by consumption of organic food must necessarily begin from infancy as suggested by the 2019 Executive Director of UNICEF, Henrietta H. Fore. She stated that “...for every child and young person everywhere, food is life-a fundamental right and a foundation of healthy nutrition and sound physical and mental development.”⁵⁷ It is therefore essential that expectant mothers are advised to focus more on organic food for infant health and proper development whenever they go for ante-natal care than on conventional food. In the realm of general health maintenance, this study advocates a gradual but steady shift towards organics which conforms better with the human body. In this regard, stronger health and longevity for Abakaliki people and Nigerians at large will be better attained if more clinics and hospitals that deal exclusively with organics and phytos were to be established in the Abakaliki area, and in other states in Nigeria. The need to include organic nutrition as a healing therapy in the academic curriculum of institutions of higher learning and as a general study is imperative for the sake of safeguarding the physical, mental and intellectual development of the upcoming generation of Abakaliki people.

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