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## Editorial

# Traditional or Orthodox Medicine in Africa: A New Look

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Individuals who become ill are often faced with a number of choices of health care providers. In most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, these will usually include the traditional healers or orthodox medicine practitioner. A variety of sources of treatment that exist for the practitioners include the use of orthodox practice and other sources that are often grouped together under the term, "Alternative Medicine". Alternative health care includes a large number of different practices including home remedies, folk medicine, traditional medicine, religious healing, homeopathy and culture-based practices such as Chinese acupuncture<sup>1</sup>. Each of these has varieties. For example, religious healing is employed in Nigeria by almost every one of the many religions and religious sects<sup>2-3</sup>.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), traditional medicine is the sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures that are used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve or treat physical and mental illnesses<sup>4</sup>. Traditional medicine might also be considered as a solid amalgamation of dynamic medical known-how and ancestral experience. In this direction, it is

difficult to characterize a 'typical' African healer, because there are many different kinds. When considered in detail, the cultural diversity and complexity of their practices are encyclopedic.

In Africa, the concepts of health and illness are more comprehensive than those of orthodox doctors. In contrast with western medicine, which is technically and analytically based, traditional African medicine takes a holistic approach: good health, disease, success or misfortune are not seen as chance occurrences but are believed to arise from the actions of individuals and ancestral spirits according to the balance or imbalance between the individual and the social environment. For most African healers, religion permeates every aspect of human existence. Like in orthodox medical practice, the practitioners of traditional medicine specialize in particular areas of their profession. Thus some traditional medical practitioners (TMPs) specialize in the use of herbs (herbalist), others are proficient in spiritual healing, especially in the use of incantations, while still others combine both. There are also traditional bonesetters and birth attendants. While in some African societies one type of healer provides several or all therapeutic

services, some others have separate practitioners for different functions.

Interestingly, rural African communities have relied upon the spiritual and practical skills of the TMPs, whose successes have become invaluable to the communities for several years and are poised to continue. Indeed, the number of TMPs in many African countries far exceed the number of qualified orthodox doctors. For example, in Kenya, there is a ratio of one medical doctor to 7,142 patients whereas there is one TMP to 987 patients. Similarly, there is one medical doctor to 25,000 patients in Uganda as against one TMP to 700 patients. In Kwahu district in Ghana, for every traditional practitioner there are 224 people as against one university trained doctor for nearly 21,000 people. The same large difference applies to Swaziland where for every traditional healer there are 110 people while for every university trained doctor there are 10,000 people. With the very large number of patients to one doctor in nearly all African countries, particularly in rural areas, reliance on traditional medicine to improve the health of many people cannot be disputed. No wonder then that traditional medicine has been described by the WHO as one of the surest means to achieve total health care coverage of the world's population.

For several years, the controversy has raged over whether or not traditional medicine has the efficacy often claimed by the practitioners. Another question is whether or not it is capable of curing disorders that have been classified incurable by orthodox medicine, as often claimed by some practitioners. Such ailments include epilepsy, asthma and AIDS that are very difficult to manage medically. Africa has a long and impressive list of medicinal plants and traditional healing approaches based on local knowledge. For instance *Securidaca Longepedunculata* is a tropical plant found almost everywhere in Africa. The dried bark and root are used purgative for nervous system disorders. Throughout East Africa, the plant's dried leaves are used for wounds

and sores, coughs, venereal disease, and snakebite. In Malawi, the leaves are used for wounds, coughs, bilharzia, venereal disease, and snakebite. The dried leaves in Malawi is used to cure headaches while in Nigeria, it is used for skin diseases. The dried roots have religious significance in Guinea-Bissau and are understood to have a psychotropic effect. The root bark is used for epilepsy in Ghana. Various researches into the pharmacological effects of various herbal products have demonstrated that many of them have pharmacological effects that produce the actions often attributed to spiritual healing effects by some TMPs. Unfortunately, there are some TMPs who tend to combine seemingly fake traditional remedies with orthodox medicines.

Although there has been marginalization of traditional medicine practiced in the past, the WHO and various governments in African countries have realized that the success of primary health care in developing countries will rely heavily on traditional medicine. Prominent in this respect is the use of herbal medicines. Many governments in the African countries are now paying more attention to herbal medicine than in the past and this is paving way for a new drive to researches and investments in this field.

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