



## Adoption of herbal treatments in post Covid-19 era in South-western Nigeria

Authors:

**Abayomi Popoola**

Affiliation:

Department of History and International Studies  
Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State



### Abstract

Coronavirus, a novel disease engulfed the world in 2019, and at its prime in 2020, millions of lives were lost. Because of its transmission mode and lack of immediate scientific cure, there was border closure among communities and nations which made each society resort to local remedies for prevention and treatment purposes. In the immediate instance, persons were advised to build their immunities. This made African communities come up with traditional varieties of initiatives. Countries such as Madagascar and Nigeria accentuated certain local productions and these innovations caught global attention. For Nigeria, among other things, the use of garlic and ginger was propagated. This was practiced by many Nigerians, and inspired the debate that herbal treatments are superior to conventional medicines. And, partly because of these local discoveries, certain Nigerian States such as Kogi and Oyo despised global norms of lockdown and never experienced high transmission rates, according to available statistics. This work therefore, through descriptive and research designs seeks to evaluate pre and (post) Covid-19 belief and adoption of herbal treatments in South-Western Nigeria. Data will be collected through primary and secondary means.

**Keywords:** Herbal Treatment, COVID-19, Southwest Nigeria, medication



## **Introduction**

For centuries, cultures around the world have had two distinct perspectives on health problems- natural and supernatural. Colds, headaches, stomachaches were seen as normal and parts of human existence. They were taken care of through household and traditional means available in various cultures. Serious and disabling diseases were categorized as being supernatural- ranging from spell, demonic possession or consequence for offending a god. Treatments were usually being sought through sorcery and other mysterious means such as counter spells, incantations or other means. Globalization however altered the course and inventions began to take place. The first modern, pharmaceutical medicine was invented in 1804 by Friedrich Sertürner, a German scientist, named it morphine, after the Greek god of sleep- further explaining influence of mysticism in conventional medicine (Hamilton and Baskett, 2000). Doctors used morphine to treat severe pain, and we still use it for that purpose in hospitals today. From morphine, then came quinine, a cure for malaria, in 1820; paracetamol in 1877 (Hartley, 2019).

Today, there are thousands of scientifically produced medicines- with several of them derived from plants, and the West has no patronage or regard for herbal medicines anymore. Their societies rely solely on modern medicines to take care of their health needs, infact, new generations of the developed nations of the world will scarcely have knowledge in herbal treatments that were once inherent in their societies. But in Africa, the knowledge has been preserved, local means of treating illnesses have remained relevant even until now although with a reduced influence.

The advent of coronavirus and its effects on the colossal loss of lives, including the failure of modern medicines to birth forth immediate solutions brought with it renewed conversation on traditional treatments. This constitutes the essence of this work.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Africans, from ancient times have used herbal means to cure varieties of health problems through traditional practitioners who include herbalists, traditional birth attendants, bone setters, diviners, traditional surgeons, spiritualists and others (Trease and Evans, 2002). They sourced for the treatments through mystic means and many of today's household herbal treatments were discovered by our predecessors through mystic means (Williamson et al., 1996).The African society relied on these until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when colonization,

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westernization and civilization happened and modern medicine gained acceptance in Africa and modern Nigeria through. Orthodox medicine has therefore become the central means through which Africans treat themselves including by the aged who once solely depended on herbs. Herbal treatments have been relegated both in societal discourse and usage.

However, there has been a resurgence, caused by expensive and unavailability of orthodox drugs to average income earners (Sofowora, 1992); ailments that are developing resistance to orthodox drugs (Odugbemi et al., 2007); and the inability of orthodox medicine to provide cure for some diseases and infections such as Coronavirus. Coronavirus which had no immediate scientific solution at its prime in 2020 led to the loss of millions of lives. Border closure and lack of global solutions made individual societies resort to local solutions. This also made African communities to come up with traditional varieties of initiatives such as the contentious herbs from Madagascar. For Nigeria, among other things, the use of garlic and ginger was propagated, and partly because of these local discoveries, certain Nigerian States such as Kogi and Oyo despised global norms of lockdown and never experienced high transmission rates, according to available statistics. This has therefore strengthened the debate that herbal treatments are superior to orthodox medicines. This work therefore, seeks to evaluate pre and post Covid-19 belief and adoption of herbal medicines in South-Western

### **Research Aim and Objectives**

The general Aim of this study is to evaluate how covid 19 has impacted the belief in and adoption of herbs and traditional medicines in the treatments of sicknesses. The specific objectives are to:

- Investigate pre-western methods of treating sicknesses in Nigeria
- Interrogate the acceptance and adoption of orthodox drugs in post-colonial Nigeria
- Discuss covid-19 in its latent phase
- Evaluate the impact of the virus vis a vis the perception of herbal medicines

### **Methodology**

The towns of Osogbo, Ede and Iree make up the geographical scope of this study and the time scope is between 2018 and 2021, for proper assessment of pre and (post) covid-19 era. Data was gathered through: In-depth Interview: with the aged, parents and herbal



vendors; Focus Group Discussion: targeting commercial transporters and civil servants; Questionnaire: A total of one hundred (100) copies of questionnaire were designed and distributed among students of tertiary institutions. Fifty (50) each are to be distributed to students of Osun State Polytechnic, Iree and Redeemer's University, Ede. While these make up the primary methods, journals, articles and books were consulted as secondary sources.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **How Orthodox Medicines Gained Acceptance in Nigeria**

Globally, the dominance of modern medicine began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in Africa from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Africans continued with herbal treatments as the only means to cure illnesses until colonization and the consequent westernization and civilization happened. Suffice to say that, Nigeria like other African countries would have continued solely with herbal treatments if European interference in their societies never happened. While there are many reasons why modern medicine gained preeminence over traditional medicines in Nigeria, this work through primary source of data collection dwelt on the following:

1. Foreign Travel: The advent of 20<sup>th</sup> century and overseas travel of Nigerians by choice and by force played a significant role in the acceptance of orthodox medicines in the country. While some of the Africans were victims of slave trade, some others went for education, enlightenment or the search for a better life. Their stay exposed them to western culture and her modern ways for treating sicknesses. This brought about change in their orientation which they brought back to Africa and over their kinsmen and other spheres of influence.

2. Global Wave of Westernization and the Bandwagon Effect: As the West makes scientific progress on health, every part of the world wants to identify with it, no one wants to be left behind. Health departments of governments make significant investment in the research and purchase of modern drugs. The interest to provide cure did not stimulate interest in developing herbal treatments, rather, governments are interested in matching or outdoing one another as far as orthodox medicine is concerned. All nations have almost agreed that modern medicine is the only solution to global health problems and this mentality has percolated across all nations and continents. In fact, every new production today doesn't take long to circulate; health regulatory bodies in nations of the world barely waste time to make imports and flood them at their pharmacies and health systems.



3. Western Education and Need to practice Medicine Related Courses: The introduction of western education and universities in Africa is a major boost to the acceptance and spread of orthodox medicines. There are fields and specializations such as Pharmacy, Medicine, Nursing, Microbiology etc whose students have no choice but to advance the influence and knowledge of scientific drugs. The fact that today there are millions of Nigerian and African parents who want, and sometimes force their wards to study and become graduates in these fields speak volume of how western education has played a pivotal role in the acceptance of western means of treating sicknesses and diseases. Students of these disciplines would have no choice but to practice, and through their practice and research, they have further enhanced the influence of modern medicine in Nigeria.

4. Indoctrination: Today, there are several persons who now believe that orthodox medicines work better because they have been brainwashed to believe anything local is inferior. The same mentality that makes local industries suffer from low patronage has contributed to this. Many have been only exposed to the problems of herbal treatments and not the solutions to these problems. This indoctrination has largely been perpetuated by the West and some Nigerian elites. Popular reasons ascribed to this are usually premised on the fact that, these treatments only give temporary relief not permanent cure; and also, that because there is no prescribed dosage, the drugs can't be trusted. This technique has undoubtedly work and there are sections of Africans today who hinge their despise of herbal treatments on these reasons.

### **Evaluation of Adoption and Belief in Herbal Treatments**

Questionnaires, Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were carried out among both the rich and the poor in Osun State, Nigeria; the literates and the illiterates; workers in formal and informal sectors of the economy; traditional and modern health practitioners, and below is the summary of the evaluation carried out on the pre-covid 19 and (post) covid-19 perception, knowledge, belief and adoption of herbal treatments in South-West Nigeria. While the study location is Osun State, the study population covers dwellers and indigenes of other South-Western states in the country.

#### ***The Pre-Covid 19 Era***

Findings showed that civilization has not altered the awareness and knowledge of herbal treatments among all categories of persons in South Western Nigeria. However, only the unlearned and the poor in the society have largely continued wholly with it; because they believe orthodox drugs cause hunger, weaken them and can prevent them from going about their daily activities. Additionally, they believe



total cure can only be through herbal means and that orthodox drugs only bring relief and not permanent cure. However, they still don't totally reject orthodox drugs and will only consider them over herbal treatments if the illness is a common one such as headaches, diarrhea whose drugs are cheap and immediate relief is needed. Another reason is if the sickness is an emergency that doesn't give the luxury of time to make herbal preparations. But, outside these conditions, they will always think and choose herbal treatments first.

On the other hand, most civil servants and workers in the formal sector of the economy have preference for orthodox drugs because of reasons ranging from free provision of healthcare by their Employers; western education and its consequent indoctrination; lack of time to make herbal preparations; limitations of traditional treatments such as in surgery. These categories of persons stated that they will only resort to herbs if modern drugs could not cure their illnesses. But, in spite of these contradicting preferences, 92% of respondents still believe that herbal treatments cure more totally than orthodox drugs.

Yet, it is obvious that both sides of arguments are largely circumstances dependent and not really out of total conviction; that is, if the learned don't have means to free healthcare they may resort to herbal treatments and if those in the informal sectors have access to free healthcare, they may also abandon herbal treatments. Only one out of twelve persons in the FGD conducted for civil servants still adopt herbal treatment in spite of access to free healthcare; thus, if circumstances change and free health care is universal, there is the possibility that there would be fewer advocates of herbal treatments among the current purveyors and vice versa.

### **The Covid-19 Era**

Covid-19 exposed the vulnerability of Africans vis-à-vis their dependence on the West to meet their health needs. The lack of orthodox drugs to cure the virus was a leveler. Both the rich and poor; local and elites resorted to the only available local alternative to keep them alive. 95% of questionnaire respondents used herbal provisions to build their immunities during the peak of the virus. However, 56% of respondents submitted that they agreed to use the herbal contents not because they believe in them but a case of anything but death. Nonetheless, all categories of Nigerians sampled used local items such as ginger, garlic, turmeric, alcohol and a kind of pepper known *asataijosi* in South Western Nigeria to increase their chances of surviving the virus. Despite the lack of trust in the preserving possibilities of the herbal products by more than half of the respondents, it was yet affirmative that covid-19 increased the knowledge of and belief in herbal treatments and strengthened the arguments of critics of



orthodox treatments and those who have always believed in the potency and the primacy of herbal treatments. Additionally, more Nigerians became convinced about herbal treatments and wished that it is standardized as African primary source of healing considering the failure of modern medicines in the direly needed global rescue.

However, this better perception and appreciation of herbal treatments haven't translated into any meaningful impact; those who became more convinced of herbal treatments still don't patronize them since after the peak of covid-19. Therefore, covid-19 has only impacted their belief in herbal treatment not in the adoption of it. Their conviction about the potency of herbal treatments has been more theoretical and practical. Most of the respondents still posited to continue with orthodox medicines to treat sicknesses where both alternatives are available.

Therefore, covid-19 only has a momentary and not a real, far-reaching impact on herbal treatments. Those who were sceptics of herbal treatments have gone back to who they have been and continue to prioritize modern drugs over traditional ones; even states and governments have not gleaned lessons from covid-19 to begin to develop local health mechanisms as an alternative to modern medicines in case these fail again in the rarity of another global health emergency. In essence, the findings revealed that there has been no change in the actions of people inspite of the failings of orthodox drugs during the height of coronavirus.

### **Recommendations**

Both traditional and modern medicines are a necessity in the contemporary world. The availability of orthodox drugs is a significant plus to health security because when it comes to immediate treatment of pain, orthodox drug is the best alternative. Thus, both are good but the diminishing influence of herbal treatments must be evaluated with a view to re-elevating it. Orthodox medicines should neither override nor relegate the traditional African ways of healing themselves. Covid-19 has revealed that health provisions should be complementary; where one fails, the other can be a necessary safety. Without doubt, one can safely posit that Africa could have found a cure to covid 19 and prevent millions of deaths if her people have not depended on the whites to always provide solutions to their problems. Therefore, Africa and Africans need to bring back to limelight this crucial aspect of their culture, so that in the rarity of another global health emergency, solutions are sought from more than one source.

Also, total dependence on orthodox drugs is a furtherance of neo-colonialism. There is the need for Africans to develop and embrace its



way of life like the West do to theirs. The continuous reliance on scientific drugs and the mental acceptance that anything local is inferior will continue to keep the continent subjugated under western influence; hence, there is need to demonstrate liberation by not despising local provisions in the midst of foreign alternatives. Furthermore, by providing solutions to global problems, Africa can bring respect to herself increase its status in the comity of continents. If herbal treatments can be globally developed as alternatives to orthodox drugs and bring cure to terminal and incurable sicknesses; it will go a long way to fetch respect for the continent among her other contemporaries.

To make this possible and effective therefore, governments need to set up herbal research institutes where investigations and trials on African plants are carried out regularly. Such as there are research centres for conventional medicines, research centres must also be founded in African communities where traditionalists and those versed in African plants are recruited, to research on the inherent sicknesses in Africa and the possible cure. This would lead to discoveries of other untapped potentials of African plants and harvest other unknown medicinal provisions of these natural gifts. And, as individual African nations make these discoveries, fellow African governments must support each other in their discoveries. At the time Madagascar came up with their herbal cure for covid-19 and the West despised it, there should have been solidarity among all African countries which would've inspired the West not to despise and dismiss the innovation.

Additionally, while free healthcare can almost completely eliminate traditional treatments; proximal access and assured potency of herbal treatments can combat it; thus, governments must ensure that accredited herbal vendors are ubiquitous like pharmacies are. Vendors however must be regulated, monitored and controlled to ensure that no one just decides to set up a kiosk to sell herbs without governmental approvals. All African nations must have regulatory agencies where these medicines are properly tested and dosages are recommended. This will prevent the abuse of herbal treatments and allay the fears of complications arising from over dosage. And, just as almost all Africans know what orthodox drugs to use for headaches, stomachaches, malaria etc, there must be an orientation to African citizens of their plants, the becoming of the extractions and the use. So, that, they can be aware of what to use when faced with common sicknesses.

Parents are to orientate their wards on herbal treatments and counsel them to use them. The fact that they are still subject to western education means the acceptance of herbal treatments by many of them will not be an easy task. It would come through Parents (a)





leading the way as examples to them- so long they see their parents use these, they would be confident that the medicines won't harm them. (b) bringing them to awareness and proof that it works by showing them persons that have been cured. (c) making them become more aware about the naturalness of the herbs as against other kinds of medicines that have undergone artificial processing. Similarly, each local community must be relentless in the advocacy for herbal treatments, with the elites leading the way, as a way to show that western education doesn't debar the belief in and adoption of traditional treatments.

It is anticipated that if all these recommendations are implemented, which ofcourse required the cooperation of both state and non-state stakeholders, then African societies would see the days of yore again.

### **Conclusion**

This work has been able to reveal that Africa and Africans have diverse means through which they cure themselves from several sicknesses and diseases. This predates colonization and other scientific innovations. However, as colonization sets in and its consequence of race superiority, mental slavery and civilization, orthodox drugs gained entrance, and further became predominant among the learned because of reasons ranging from being free, accessible and the fact that they come with prescribed dosage. Most persons who have remained with herbal treatments are largely illiterates and the poor whose reasons for doing so have been premised on quick recovery, absolute cure, low cost and being natural. Nonetheless, that the influence has reduced has not affected the perception among almost all peoples in South West that herbal treatments remain potent for treating sicknesses in-spite of their flaws such as having no stipulated dosage and the lack of government regulation. However, Nigeria and Nigerians have chosen and continued with modern drugs instead of finding solutions to the shortcomings of herbal medicines. Covid-19 has not so much changed the dynamics; although a few more persons now have enhanced estimation of herbal treatment, it has not made them adopt it as their way of treating sicknesses.

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