

Contextual study of African traditional herbal treatment (ATHT) and natural remedy of seventh-day Adventist (SDA)

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Abstract

The continent of Africa is endowed with numerous medicinal plants of which researchers are yet to exhaust the medicinal values. Africans have over many centuries used the known herbs for prevention and treatment of many maladies although with little or no clinical test. Some African herbalists claim to be gifted with this knowledge and ability or transmitted to through their parents or grandparents. Christian faiths on the other hand are finding the use of medicinal plants as an alternative to orthodox medicine, amongst these Christian faiths is Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA). By the use of literatures and from personal observations both as Africans and as members of Seventh-day Adventist church, the authors contextually and comparatively posit that African Traditional Medicine and SDA health reform are not divergent, hence there is a need for both to dialogue on some certain issues.

Keywords: Africa, Herbal, Treatment, Natural Remedy, SDA Church

Introduction

The need for African theology has been advocated for long within the Africans scholars. One of the areas one would need to look at is the case of medicine. In the SDA orientation, it is known as 'Health Reform' or 'Natural Remedy' although in contemporary times, it is referred to as 'Adventist Health Message'.¹John Mbiti² gives a helpful list of what he considers to be the main

¹Cesar Augusto Galvez, "A Wholeness Approach for the Adventist Health Message", Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Cesar-Galvez-4/publication/316662121_A_Wholeness_Approach_for_the_Adventist_Health_Message/links/590a9706458515ebb4a54018/A-Wholeness-Approach-for-the-Adventist-Health-Message.pdf Accessed 8/4/2021

² John Mbiti, African Traditional Medicine and Its Relevance for Christian Work, In *So sende ich euch*. Otto Waack, et al., eds. Stuttgart, Germany: Evangelische Missionsverlag, (1973), 310-319. Cited by WILLEM BERENDS, African Traditional Healing Practices and the Christian Community Retrieved from <https://booksc.org/dl/40191996/973336> Accessed 8/4/2021



elements of the traditional African approach to healing. These are (1) treatment, (2) prevention, (3) protection against agents of evil, (4) purification, (5) ensuring success, (6) retribution, (7) exorcism, and (8) eradication of witchcraft. Although in this list Mbiti left out one important aspect of African traditional healing, that of diagnosis. There are remarks as to African Traditional Herbalist working in opposition to the Christian Missionaries. Our main focus in this paper is to see, if there are some common grounds between them. Especially that of the prevention and treatment that leads to healing, in comparison with the treatment among SDAs. The need for this paper is due to whether African way of healing is alien to Christian medicine. Scholars have asked, is there anything that the African Traditional Medicine and Christian Medicine can learn from each another? Are there any possibilities of cooperation or corroboration between these two health systems?³Hence, the question whether Christians patronizing African herbal medicine men are practicing syncretism or not. Perhaps, at the end of this paper, credence could be given to African herbal treatment and not seen as being diabolical or fetish or Satanic.⁴

Concept of illness and disease

Before I delve into the concept of illness and diseases, health is should be known first, the term "Health" is best defined by the World Health Organization (WHO). According to WHO "health" is "a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". According to the Webster's Dictionary⁵ health is defined as "the condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit. Also, a condition in which someone or something is thriving or doing well". Illness on the other hand is defined by Kleinman⁶ as the socio-cultural dimension within which a person experiences disease. Susser⁷ in 1973 tried to define the term "illness" by referring it to the inner sense of an individual's feeling unwell. According to him, illness does not refer to any explicit pathology, but refers to a person's subjective understanding of it, such as discomfort, tiredness, or general malaise. We can even regard the concept of sickness as such a notion that combines the biomedical model (disease) with the socio-cultural context of the patient (illness).

³Olaotse Gabasiane, "Adventist and African Traditional Medicine: Breaking the Silence," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 9 [2013], No. 2, Art. 8, 90.

⁴Temba Rugwiji, "Faith-based healing and African traditional medicineIn Zimbabwe: A postcolonial perspective," *TheologiaViatorum* 43 (1), a25. (2019), Retrieved from, <https://theologiaviatorum.org/index.php/tv/article/view/25/61> Accessed 26/4/2021

⁵Merriam-Webster, "Health" (1828). Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/health> Accessed 23/4/2021

⁶Kleinman A., Eisenberg L., Good B., Culture, illness, and care: clinical lessons from anthropological and cross-cultural research. *Ann Intern Med* (1978). Retrieved from http://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/S000825CR/P001532/M018450/ET/1483520016Text.pdf Accessed 23/4/2021

⁷Susser M., Causal thinking in the health sciences. (Oxford University Press, New York, 1973) Retrieved from http://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/S000825CR/P001532/M018450/ET/1483520016Text.pdf Accessed 23/4/2021

Coming down to the concept of disease, dis-ease (from old French and ultimately Latin) is literally the absence of ease or elbow room. The basic idea is of an impediment to free movement. But nowadays the word is more commonly used without a hyphen to refer to a “disorder of structure or function in an animal or plant of such a degree as to produce or threaten to produce detectable illness or disorder”—or again, more narrowly, to “a definable variety of such a disorder, usually with specific signs or symptoms or a vetting a specific location”.⁸ We can presume that disease is an abnormal, pathological state that affects either parts of a human being or all the parts of individual.⁹ According to the Dorland Medical Dictionary¹⁰, disease is often interpreted as a medical condition that is associated with explicit indicators and signs. Disease is a pathological process which makes an individual to deviate from his normal state of being. In medical sociology, a disease is defined as “an adverse physical state consisting of a physiological dysfunction within an individual, as compared to an illness (psychological awareness of a disease) or a sickness (a social state)”.¹¹

African Traditional Herbal Healing

In discussing this section, the work of Ezekwesili-ofili Josephine Ozioma and Okaka Antoinette Nwamaka Chinwe¹² is of great consideration. According to them, herbal medicine is a part and parcel of and sometimes synonymous with African medicine. It is the oldest and still the most widely used system in the world today.¹³ Herbal medicines is also called botanical medicines, vegetable medicines, or phtytomedicines, as defined by World Health Organization (WHO)¹⁴ refers to herbs, herbal materials, herbal preparations, and finished herbal products that contains whole plants, parts of plants, or other plant materials, including leaves, bark, berries, flowers, and roots, and/or their extracts as active ingredients intended for human therapeutic use or for other benefits in humans and sometimes animals.¹⁵

Ezekwesili and Ozioma¹⁶ further posited that herbal medicine is a special and prominent form of traditional medicine, in which the traditional healer, in this case known as the herbalist special, specializes in the use of herbs to treat various ailments. Their role is so remarkable since it arises from a thorough

⁸ Kenneth M Boyd, “Disease, illness, sickness, health, healing and wholeness: exploring some elusive concepts” *J Med Ethics: Medical Humanities* (2000), 26:9–17 Retrieved from <https://mh.bmj.com/content/medhum/26/1/9.full.pdf> Accessed 23/4/2021

⁹ Gateway to All, “Defining the concepts health, illness, sickness, disease, healing and wholeness”, Retrieved from http://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/S000825CR/P001532/M018450/ET/1483520016Text.pdf Accessed 23/4/2021

¹⁰ Gateway to All, “Defining the concepts health...”

¹¹ Gateway to All, “Defining the concepts health...”

¹² Ezekwesili-ofili Josephine Ozioma and Okaka Antoinette Nwamaka Chinwe, “Herbal Medicines in Africa Traditional Medicine”, *Open access peer-reviewed chapter*, (2019), retrieved from <https://www.intechopen.com/books/herbal-medicine/herbal-medicines-in-african-traditional-medicine> Accessed 23/4/2021

¹³ Ezekwesili-ofili et al, “Herbal Medicines in Africa Traditional Medicine”.

¹⁴ Ezekwesili-ofili et al, “Herbal Medicines in Africa Traditional Medicine”.

¹⁵ Ezekwesili-ofili et al, “Herbal Medicines in Africa Traditional Medicine”.

¹⁶ Ezekwesili-ofili et al, “Herbal Medicines in Africa Traditional Medicine”.

knowledge of the medicinal properties of indigenous plants and the pharmaceutical steps necessary in turning such plants into drugs such as the selection, compounding, dosage, efficacy, and toxicity.

African herbal medicines compared to modern allopathic medicine is freely available and easily be accessed by all. As a result, there is limited consultation with healers because there is a fairly good knowledge of common curative herbs especially in the rural areas except in the case of treatment of chronic diseases. However, even where consultation is done, there is lack of coherence among traditional healers on the preparation procedures and correct dosage of herbal medicines. Nonetheless, according to WHO¹⁷ at least 80% of people in Africa still rely on medicinal plants for their health care. Ezekwesili and Ozioma¹⁸ report that in Nigeria, and indeed the entire West Africa, herbal medicine has continued to gain momentum, some of the advantages being low cost, affordability, availability, acceptability, and apparently low toxicity.¹⁹ Olaotse Gabasiane²⁰ posits that the herbalist—acquires his or her skills through apprenticeship from an experienced grandfather, uncle, or other individuals; the skills and knowledge are passed on from generation to generation. As such, “the herbalist or *inyangais* not mystically defined”²¹. This means that such an herbalist “freely gives herbal medicine without any religious connotations”²². African believes in Natural and Preternatural causes of diseases. The Natural causes would include bad food, bad air and dirty environment.²³

Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Natural Remedy

Seventh-day Adventists are a global family of Christians who hold the Bible as the ultimate authority.²⁴ The Bible is held as their only creed and certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.²⁵ The 28 Fundamental Beliefs can be organized into six categories of doctrine: God, man, salvation, the church, daily Christian life, and last-day events (restoration).²⁶ According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Adventist is one of a group of Protestant Christian churches that trace their origin to the United States in the mid-19th century and that are distinguished by their emphasis on the belief that the personal, visible return of Christ in glory (i.e., the Second Coming) is

¹⁷WHO, Global Report on Traditional And Complementary Medicine 2019, <https://www.who.int/traditional-complementary-integrative-medicine/WhoGlobalReportOnTraditionalAndComplementaryMedicine2019.pdf?ua=1> Accessed 23/4/2021.

¹⁸Ezekwesili and Ozioma (2019).

¹⁹ Ezekwesili and Ozioma (2019).

²⁰Olaotse Gabasiane, Adventist and African Traditional Medicine: Breaking the Silence, *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 9 [2013], No. 2, Art. 8, 87

²¹Dauskardt, Rolf P. A., “The Changing Geography of Traditional Medicine: Urban Herbalism on the Witwatersrand, South Africa” *GeoJournal* 22, no. 3, (1999), 277.

²²Gehman, Richard J., *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*. Kijabe, (Kenya: Kesho Publications), (1989), 78.

²³Sylvia, O., DISEASE AETIOLOGY IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY, *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi E Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per L'Africa E L'Oriente*, 55(4), (2000), 583-590. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40761483>

²⁴<https://www.adventist.org/who-are-seventh-day-adventists/> Accessed 24/4/2021

²⁵<https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/> Accessed 24/4/2021

²⁶<https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/> Accessed 24/4/2021

close at hand, a belief shared by many Christians.²⁷ They all believe Saturday to be the Bible Sabbath. 2020 statistics of the world churches was 92,186, companies 72,749, church memberships 21,760,076...²⁸

Adventists base their beliefs on the Holy Scriptures, they have preached a dynamic Christian faith that includes whole restoration including physical, mental, spiritual, social, and humanitarian aid. Adventists believe that "health reform and teaching of health and temperance are inseparable parts of the church's message"²⁹Kesis³⁰traces the health reform as one of the lifestyle standards of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church back to 1863; only a few weeks after the formal organization of the church. This health message has been presented from both the biblical perspective and Ellen White's writings on health. The first audience has been the church members, and the second audience, the general community and society.

Galve³¹ posits Adventist Health Message (AHM) originates from the Bible. The principles and framework of the AHM are based on the Bible. There are several biblical perspectives on health, disease, healing, and public health, such as "salvation and healing" (Ps 103:3-5, Mat 5:24-25), "body as temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 3:16,17; 6:19-20), "the desire of God for His children: health" (3 John 2), "healing, a gift of the Spirit" (1 Cor 12:8-10), "the massive healing ministry of Jesus Christ" (Mat 4:23,24), "the awards for youth that have best eating habits" (Dan 1:8, 12-20), "norms of public health among Israel" (Lev 11-15), "healing miracles through the Old and New Testament" (Exod 11-12, Num 21:4-9, 2 Kgs 2:1-11, John 20:31, Acts 5:12-16), and many more. The perspectives of biblical anthropology (Gen 2:7, 1Thess 5:23) and the Laws of God (Exod 15:26, Deut 7:15, John 5:14) provide the framework for the biblical teaching on health, disease, healing, and public health.

The Adventist church's commitment to matters pertaining to health and health care remains strong. Generally Adventists favor rational, scientific approaches to health care over pseudoscientific ones because "laws of the natural world are of divine origin." Adventists accept the concept that there are natural remedies that may be beneficial for the treatment of disease, particularly in the home situation. Such remedies should be rational and in harmony with the laws of physiology.³² Recent studies show that Adventists who follow church teaching on healthful living have increased longevity. White male and white female Adventists in California live 7 1/4 years and 4 1/2 years longer, respectively,

²⁷<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Adventism> Accessed 24/4/2021

²⁸<https://www.adventist.org/statistics/seventh-day-adventist-world-church-statistics-2020/> Accessed 24/4/2021

²⁹ General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2010, p. 140

³⁰Kesis, R. T. *The influence of changes on historical standards in selected urban Seventh-day Adventist churches in Kenya* (Doctoral thesis), 2014.. Kenyatta University, Kenya. Cited by Cesar Augusto Galvez, "A Wholeness Approach for the Adventist Health Message".

³¹Cesar Augusto Galve (2010)

³²Edwin R. DuBose (ed.), "The Seventh-day Adventist Tradition, Religious Beliefs and HealthcareDecisions" Retrieved from <https://www.advocatehealth.com/assets/documents/faith/adventist3.pdf> Accessed 26/4/2021

than their California contemporaries.³³ Further, Adventists who live a low-risk lifestyle—high physical activity, vegetarian diet, frequent consumption of nuts, medium body mass—show a 10-year advantage in life expectancy, compared to those Adventists who have a high-risk lifestyle.³⁴ This is made possible by practicing the eight remedies³⁵—pure air, water, sunlight, exercise, rest, temperance, adequate diet, and trusting in God’s power.

Adventist approach to living healthy takes more of eating proper diet which is combined cereals, legumes, fruits, vegetables, and nuts, naturally prepared, give more physical and mental vigor than any other diet.³⁶ The original diet chosen by the Creator was cereals, fruits, legumes, and nuts (Gen 1:29). Later, “plants of the field” (Gen 3:18), that is, fibrous vegetables and roots, were added. This adds up to Adventist advocating for vegetarianism. Scientific evidence on the benefits of a vegetarian diet is increasing by showing a potential to decrease the risk of chronic disease³⁷ and the consumption of whole grain cereals, which are part of a vegetarian diet, contributes to a reduced risk of obesity—Type-2 diabetes—, cardiovascular disease, and colorectal cancer.³⁸

The use of plant based to heal is also practiced in Adventist faith. Reason why The Adventist Development and Relief Agency, ADRA, is currently working to raise awareness about the dangers of over-harvesting. It is also helping farmers to establish new businesses cultivating and selling medicinal herbs.³⁹ Medicinal trees like Moringa (*the miracle tree*, good for water purification, contains high levels of iron, calcium and Vitamin A, and is used to boost the immune system, as well as treating a wide range of illnesses⁴⁰ are promoted in Adventist faith to members to help prevent diseases and as well serves as herbal treatment.

Contextual and comparative study of ATHT and natural remedy of SDA

African Traditional Herbal Treatment (ATHT) certainly does have its own limitations: a lack of documented regimen for the use of its medicines, some unhygienic practices in administering treatments and surgery⁴¹ unstandardized dosages of herbs or medicines prescribed, and so on. However, a basic principle in dialogue is to begin with a common ground. There is enough shared

³³DuBose (ed.), “The Seventh-day Adventist Tradition...”.

³⁴ Fraser and Shavlik, “Ten Years of Life”; Fraser, “Associations”; Phillips, “Cancer among Seventh-day Adventists.” Cited by Edwin R. DeBose.

³⁵ White, E. G. (1999). *Ministry of healing*, 127.

³⁶White, E. G. (1999). *Ministry of healing*, 127

³⁷Nadimi, H., Yousefinejad, A., Djazayery, A., Hosseini, M., & Hosseini, S., Association of vegan diet with RMR, body composition and oxidative stress, *Acta Scientiarum Polonorum Technologia Alimentaria*, 12(3), (2013), 311-317.

³⁸Lafiandra, D., Riccardi, G., & Shewry, P. R., “Improving cereal grain carbohydrates for diet and health, *Journal of Cereal Science*, 59(3), (2014), 312-326, DOI: 10.1016/j.jcs.2014.01.001.

³⁹ CTA, “Medicinal Plant” Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/132675062.pdf> Accessed 26/4/2021

⁴⁰CTA, “Medicinal Plant”.

⁴¹Isola, Omoleke Ishaq, (2013), The “Relevance” of the African Traditional Medicine (Alternative Medicine) to Health Care Delivery System in Nigeria. *Journal of Developing Areas* 47, no. 1:323

commonality for Adventist and ATHT to cooperate in certain areas and learn from one another.

To begin with, both systems do have a holistic approach to healing. This should allow some ground for dialogue, as this is a principle that is akin to both parties.

“About 2

5% of modern medicines are descended from plants first used traditionally”⁴²

This should be of pharmacological interest to Adventist Pharmacist, providing common ground to work with herbalists to improve the efficacy of the herbs they use. Besides, “with proper guidance, these same plants may still protect one from more mundane afflictions such as headache, indigestion, rheumatism and many other complaints”⁴³. Because of plural medicine, a situation where a patient consults different forms of medical systems, there is a danger of using prescriptions that have not been co-managed—to the detriment of the user. As such, Adventist doctors and herbalists need to work together so that they do not administer medicines that work at cross-purposes. Lastly, Gospel missionary and the medical missionary are at the forefront of Adventist mission, so were the traditional priest and traditional doctor to ATR. Thus, the need for a respect of one another.

Conclusion

Adventist Christians and African Traditional Religion share some common ground. Even ATR has an impact on how members worship as well as how they deal with disease, misfortune, and even death. In essence, the African worldview is not trivial, and their quest for a holistic approach to health and life in general all speak to the necessity for a healing theology for the African church. There are a number of factors that point to this, including Christian medicine. When it comes to the fear of evil and whether or not some herbalists are diviners, the Adventist church has chaplains and pastors on hand to care for people in their communities. Members with a biblically based faith and a worldview formed by biblical principles will be better prepared to meet the challenges of life in Africa. The African Adventist Church should seriously consider engaging in a discourse with African Traditional Herbalist practitioners. Non-mystic herbalists are the practitioners to approach if you want to start a conversation. This could lead to Western Christians or academics acknowledging African Tradition medicine as divine rather than diabolical.

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