

Society of Young Nigerian Writer

Yoruba Fact-Finder

**COMPILATIONS OF YORUBA HISTORY,
CULTURE AND TRADITION**



**Compiled by:
Wole Adedoyin**

Yoruba medicine

Yorùbá medicine (egbogi) is a herbal-based form of the science and art of healing. This form of herbal medicine is embraced by various communities in West Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere around the globe.

“African herbal medicine is commonly called Yorubic or Orisha medicine on the African continent. It started from a religious text, called Ifa Corpus. According to tradition, the Ifa Corpus was revealed by the mystic prophet, Orunmilla, around 4,000 years ago in the ancient city of Ile-Ife, now known as major city in Yorùbáland. The last 400 years saw individuals in the Caribbean and South America practice the Yorubic healing system as a token of their past when the first wave of personnel arrived in the Americas.”^[1]

Herbal medicine, also called botanical medicine or phytomedicine, refers to the use of any plant's seeds, berries, roots, leaves, bark, or flowers for medicinal purposes.

Contents

1 Basic Philosophies

- 1.1 Deliberation
- 2 Controversy
 - 2.1 Integration
 - 2.2 Holistic Health
- 3 Orishas in Yorùbá Medicine

- 4 Titles and Processes
- 5 References
- 6 External links

Basic Philosophies

According to A D Buckley, Yorùbá medicine has major similarities to conventional medicine in the sense that its main thrust is to kill or expel from the body tiny, invisible "germs" or insects (*kokoro*) and also worms (*aron*) which inhabit small bags within the body. For the Yoruba, however, these germs and worms perform useful functions in the healthy body, aiding digestion, fertility etc. However, if they become too powerful in the body, they must be controlled, killed or driven out with bitter-tasting plants contained in medicines. Yorùbá medicine is quite different from homeopathy, which uses medicinal ingredients that imitates pathological symptoms. Rather, in a similar manner to mainstream European medicine, it strives to destroy the agencies that cause disease.^[2]

Buckley claims that traditional Yorùbá ideas of the human body are derived from the image of a cooking pot, susceptible to overflowing. The female body overflows dangerously but necessarily once a month; germs and worms in the body can overflow their "bags" in the body if they are given too much "sweet" (tasty) food. The household is understood in a similar way. As germs overflow their bag, menstrual blood the female body, and palm oil the cooking pot, so women in the marital household tend to overflow and return to their natal homes.^[3]

As well as using bitter plants to kill germs and worms, Yorùbá herbalists also use incantation (*ofo*) in medicines to bring good luck (*awure*), for example, to bring money or love. Medicinal

incantations are in some ways like the praise songs addressed to human beings or gods: their purpose is to awaken the power of the ingredients hidden in the medicine. Most medicinal incantations use a form of word-play, similar to punning, to evoke the properties of the plants implied by the name of the plant.^[4]

Some early writers believed that the Yoruba people are actually an East African tribe who moved from the Nile River to the Niger area. For example, Dr. Jonathan Olumide Lucas claims that "the Yoruba, during antiquity, lived in ancient Egypt before migrating to the Atlantic coast."

“With Egypt at its roots, it is therefore inevitable that African herbal medicine became associated with magic. Amulets and charms were more common than pills as preventions or curatives of diseases. Priests, who were from the earliest days the forefathers of science and medicine, considered diseases as possession by evil demons and could be treated using incantations along with extracts from the roots of certain plants. The psychosomatic method of healing disorders used primarily by psychiatrists today is based loosely on this ancient custom.”^[5]

Yorùbá traditionalists claim in their oratory history that Orunmilla taught the people the customs of divination, prayer, dance, symbolic gestures, personal, and communal elevation. They believe he also advised his people on spiritual baths, meditation, and herbal medicine in particular. The Ifa Corpus is considered to be the foundation of the traditionalist herbology.

[edit] Deliberation

To the modern man/woman, some medicinal practices may be deemed to be a bit too weird for their liking. But it must be recognized that to the Yorùbás it is not merely a procedure such as it is in other forms, but an outright system. Sometimes referred to as a remedy, a religious undertone and a scientific phenomenon all rolled into one.°

Controversy

[edit] Integration

Oyelakin suggests that the major difference between **Yorùbá medicine** and orthodox medicine is that the former is homeopathic in nature while the later is allopathic.

He goes on to say that the orthodox methodology for the treatment of diseases is based on what he called "the contrary principle"

which states that: *illnesses and diseases should be treated with chemical agents that produce effects that are in opposition to those exhibited by the illnesses being treated.*

This type of practise is also concerned primarily with the elimination of symptoms.^[6] However, according to Makinde:

The treatment of a disease is the application of what such disease is forbidden to come in contact with, at whose sight must simply disappear^[7]

Furthermore, while 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.

This suggests that while orthodox medicine is only occupied with one function;

- Getting rid of the symptoms,

Yorùbá medicine performs three distinct functions:

- Getting rid of the symptoms,

- Identifying and removing the causes of the illness, and
- Maintaining a holistic balance in the patient.^[8]

It has been argued that it is untrue the claims that suggest orthodox medicine is not concerned with identifying and removing the causes of illness. Like for instance STD and the warning against casual intercourse.

Holistic Health

Even though the above argument cannot be used in terms of the holistic healing of a patient, modern orthodox medicine has a place for this concept whereby all aspects of the patients needs, psychological, physical and social, and mentally are said to be taken into account and seen as a whole. Yet this barely "scratches the surface" if compared to the Yorubas viewpoint as does include this concept and further divulges into other aspects in terms of the patients emotional, spiritual, and even environmental balance/imbalance.

In his piece on "Yorùbá Culture" **Kola Abimbola** stipulates that in order to achieve a holistic healing through Yorùbá medicine, some certain conditions must hold. For instance, the Onisegun (Herbalist) would be interested in the spiritual causes of the illness. To do this, there is the need for the understanding of the constitution of man. For him, a person has two parts which he describes as "the body" and "the soul complex".

"Taking into account one's body, mind, emotions, and spiritual life, holistic health combines the best of modern diagnosis and monitoring techniques with both ancient and innovative health methods. These can include natural diet and herbal remedies, nutritional supplements, exercise, relaxation, psycho-spiritual counseling, meditation, breathing exercises, and other self-regulatory

practices. It addresses not only symptoms, but the entire person, and his or her current life predicament, including family, job, and religious life. It emphasizes prevention, health maintenance, high-level wellness and longevity. It views the client as an active participant in the healing process, rather than simply a passive recipient of "health care." At once personal, ecological, and transcultural, holism has become the new health paradigm for the 21st century."^[9]

Orishas in Yorùbá Medicine

Tradition has it that many Orishas (deities/divinities) play a significant role in the life of the Yorùbás nevertheless in this form of medicine. And with this "Osanyin/Osain" or 'the whispering genie' is deemed one of the more important.

Osain is associated with the domination over all wild herbs, and is considered by most practitioners as the greatest herbalist that ever lived. There are so many herbs and plants that can be used in healing, that only someone with a "trained eye" can take full advantage of their functions. For instance, a stipulation of concession has it that although plants and herbs have purely their "medicinal value", they also carry "mystical value".

The "Osainista" is said to be an expert in local herbology; possessing the "know how" on herbs and plants; correctly gathering the necessary herbs and plants for the right cause. Some plants are to be gathered at certain times of the day or night. Certain plants are meant to be exposed to the necessary incantation(s) and implementation of offerings in order to reap adequate results. As said before there are a multitude of Orisha's each with their physical qualities and herbal attributes, each sometimes interwoven into one another.^[10]

Ifa has been said to also play an important role towards achieving the end product of any one healing process.

Orishas	Attributes	Physical	Herbs (Ewe)
		Correspondences	
Orunmila	<p>Yorùbá Grand Priest and custodian of the Ifa Oracle, source of knowledge is believed to have good knowledge of Human Form, Purity, Cures illness and deformities. His subordinate priests or followers are the Babalawo.</p>	<p>Skullcap, Sage, Kola, Nut, Basil, Hyssop, Blue Vervain, White Willow, Valerian</p>	
Èsù or Elegbara	<p>Often ill-translated as "The Devil" or "The Evil Being", Èsù is neither of these but best referred to as "The Trickster" dealing a hand of misfortune to those that do not tribute or deemed to be constantly "unaware" of their surroundings. Also referred as "divine messenger"; a prime negotiator between negative and positive forces in body; enforcer of the "law of being". And is said to assist in enhancing the power derived from herbal medicines.</p>	<p>sympathetic nervous system</p>	All Herbs

		Eucalyptus,	Alfalfa,
	heart, kidney (adrenal	Hawthorn,	Bloodroot,
Ogún	The divinity of iron and metallurgy.	Parsley,	Motherwort,
	glands), tendons, and	Garlic	
	sinews		

	Literarily Mother Fish is held by Yoruba		
	traditionalists as Mother of Waters,	Kelp,	Squawvine,
	Nurturer of Water Resources. According to	Cohosh ^[disambiguation needed] ,	
Yemoja	Olorishas, she is the amniotic fluid in the womb, liver, breasts,	Dandelion, Yarrow, Aloe,	
	womb of the pregnant woman, as well as, buttocks	Spirulina, Mints, Passion	
	the breasts which nurture. She is	Plower, Wild Yam Root	
	considered the protective energies of the		
	feminine force.		

	Wife of former Oba of Oyo called Shango		
	(another Yoruba Orisha see below) is said		
	to turn into a river in Osogbo. Yoruba	Yellow Dock, Burdock,	
	historians ascribed to her Sensuality,	Cinnamon, Damiana,	
	Beauty, Gracefulness, symbolizing Yorubas'	Anis ^[disambiguation needed] ,	
Oshun	search for clarity and flowing motion. She is	Raspberry, Yarrow,	
	associated with several powers including	Chamomile, Lotus,	
	abilities to heal with cool water, induction	Uva-Ursi, Buchu, Myrrh,	
	of fertility and feminine essence, Women	Echinacea	
	appeal to her for child-bearing and for the		
	alleviation of female disorders. The Yoruba		

traditions described her as fond of babies and her intervention is sought if a baby becomes ill. Oshu in Yoruba traditions is also known for her love of honey.

Associated with Virility, Masculinity, Fire,

Lightning, Stones, Protector/Warrior,

Magnetism. He is said to have abilities to reproductive system

Shango transform base substance into that which is (male), bone marrow,

pure and valuable. He was the Oba of Oyo life force or chi

He derived his nickname Oba Koso from the

annals of his immortality.

Plantain, Saw Palmetto,

Hibiscus, Fo-ti,

Sarsaparilla, Nettles,

Cayenne

The other Wife of former Oba of Oyo called

Shango (another Yoruba Orisha see above)

said to turn into River Niger is often

described as Tempest, Guardian of the lungs, bronchial

Oya Cemetery, Winds of Change, Storms, passages, mucous

Progression, she is usually in the company membranes

of her husband Shango. In Yoruba beliefs

she is the Orisha of rebirth as things must

die so that new beginnings arise

Mullein, Comfrey,

Cherrybark, Pleurisy Root,

Elecampane, Horehound,

Chickweed

Titles and Processes

An "Onisegun" refers to a herbalist, Oloogun is one of several terms for a medical practitioner, and a Babalawo is a priest/priestess.

An "Oloogun", in addition to analyzing symptoms of the patient, look for the emotional and spiritual causes of the disease to placate the negative forces (ajogun) and only then will propose treatment that he/she deems appropriate. This may include herbs in the form of an infusion, enema, etc. In Yoruban medicine they also use dances, spiritual baths, symbolic sacrifice, song/prayer, and a change of diet to help cure the sick. They also believe that the only true and complete cure can be a change of "consciousness" where the individual can recognize the root of the problem themselves and seek to eliminate it. Disease to the Yorùbás is seen as a disruption of our connection with the Earth. "Physicians are often priests, priestesses, or high priests, or belong to a guild-like society hidden within tribal boundaries, completely secret to the outside world. In their communities, even obtaining an education in medicine may require becoming an initiate of one of these societies. The world view of a priest involves training and discipline to interpret events that are indicative of the nature of the patient's alignment internally with their own conscious and unrecognized issues, as well as with a variety of external forces and beings which inhabit our realm and require the inner vision and wisdom of the priest to interpret."^[1]

Yorubas are great believers of preventative medication. They are critical in the way they relate to modern western medicine. According to elite practitioners, if we listen to our bodies they will provide us with the preparation and appropriate knowledge we need to regain our balance with our immediate surroundings.

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