

IGBO TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND HEALING

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Introduction

Among the Igbo life is usually regarded as the most precious gift of the Supreme Being and as such it must be protected and prolonged as much as possible. Whenever there is any threat to life by disease and other misfortunes, steps are taken to eliminate the source of danger and get total security. Igbo cosmology is world affirming and thus demands that life in the world must be kept free from problems especially ill-health and obstacles which may hinder the fulfilment of the desired goals. The Igbo attach high value to life, anything that tampers with it is rejected but "any practice or institution that promotes or prolongs life and helps to make it more abundant is encouraged."¹

Among the unfriendly agents that threaten life is illness. Aylward Shorter is therefore right when he stated that: "Sickness for the African is a diminution of life, a threat posed to life; and healing is an activity second only to that of giving life. Petition for healing is possibly the most common subject of prayers".²

Healing thus becomes a cardinal religious practice among the Igbo.

1. Concept of Health and Healing

Health as understood by the Igbo is far more social than biological. It does not entirely mean an absence of physical ailments. According to Lambo, "Health is not an isolated phenomenon but part of the entire magico-religious fabric far more than an absence of disease."³ As for Onunwa:

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¹S. N. Ezeanya, "Healing in Traditional Society" War No. 17 Vol. 1 1976, p. 3.

²Aylward Shorter, *Prayer in Religious Traditions of Africa* (Nairobi O.U.P. 1975), P. 60.

³T.A. Lambo, "Patterns of Psychiatric care in Developing African Countries" in Ari Kiev(Ed). *Magic Faith and Healing* (New York: The Free Press 1954), pp. 445-446.

What people understand as sickness affects a person's world-view, Ethical values, self-image and relationship with neighbours. A healthy man is therefore one who has not been uprooted from the context of his deities, one who is not destabilised or incapacitated.⁴

To ensure security and comfort the traditionalists regularly try to maintain or cut relationship with the spirits. For man to survive in this world to be able to live a successful and happy life and upon death to join the ancestors, he strives at all times to maintain a harmonious relationship with all the forces that impinge on his life and being. This therefore means a continuous quest for equilibrium and the wooing of benevolent forces and keeping in check of the malevolent ones.

The Igbo always give mystic interpretation to their major success and setbacks. No death or sickness is just physical rather some evil forces must be behind the scene. This type of impression has implications on the practice of traditional medicine.

Healing therefore is an elaborate ministry in which the practitioners usually seek to attend to the patient's physical well being as well as his spiritual and psychological dimensions and at the same time tries to reintegrate the person to the full membership of his community.

2. Traditional Medicine

Medicine in Igbo concept is wider than the western view of it. Medicine known as *ogwu* goes beyond mere administration of herbs for physical treatment of diseases to the invocation of magical or spiritual influence for wholesome treatment of the sick. Medicine means any substance that is used in treating or in preventing disease or illness. Medicine involves medicament as well as prophylactic. According to Metuh: "Making medicine is called *igwo ogwu*. This same term translates the making of every kind of medicine whether curative, protective, medicine made to secure good luck or offensive medicine".⁵

⁴U. R. Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo Traditional Religion* (Nigeria Pacific Publishers 1990), p. 82.

⁵Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* London: Gcoffrey Chapman 1981, p.97.

Medicine in Igbo belief can be used not only to heal or kill but also to secure power, health, fertility, personality or moral reform.

In Igboland the totality of man is affected by religion which also helps in solving man's problems. The religious man also needs health and matters, which affect health, are included in the realm of religion. Therefore the practice of medicine has some links with the religion. As rightly pointed out by Okoro:

Terms associated with life and death (*onwu na ndu*), with creation (*okike*), with the creator (*chukwu*), with disease (*oria*), with causes of disease, deities, doctors (*dibia*) with medicine (*ogwu*) indicate that health care for the preservation or prolongation of life had been with us from our earliest history.⁶

The practice of medicine supports the Igbo belief that the universe is infested with vital forces or supernatural powers which man who has the knowledge and ability could tap for personal use. To the Igbo the knowledge and ability to tap such vital forces are given by *Agwu* divinity - the patron of medicine. There is a firm belief in the power of medicine and in every community there are renowned persons responsible for medicine and for healing of people's ailments. J. S. Mbiti confirms this when he said:

Medicine men are found in every African society and village. They may be either men or women. They carry out the work of healing the sick and putting things right when they go wrong. Since in every homestead and every village persons fall sick or meet with accidents and misfortunes, medicine men are considered to be extremely important. They are the ones who come to the rescue to the individual in matters of health and general welfare.⁷

In the same vein Ukeje has opined that 'general health care, delivery, etc. required specialised knowledge and skills in the traditional Igbo communities'.⁸ Most medicines are usually made from herbs and each herb

⁶A. N. Okori, "Chukwu ka Dibia" - A look into Igbo Traditional Medicine" 1988 Ahiajoku Lecture (Owerri: Ministry of Information 1988), p. 7.

⁷J.S. Mbiti - Introduction to African Religion (London Heinemann 1975), p. 150

⁸B. O. Ukehe, "Skill Acquisition in Traditional Igbo Society" Igbo Traditional

produces its own kind of medicine which can be used by a person who knows its product to cure ailments. Though herbs are used in the preparation of medicine, *ogwu* is not just herb, it is herb usually charged with spiritual power by the use of incantations, rites and spells. It therefore means that before the herbs could be put into use in the curative process certain deities, especially *Agwu*, are invoked. Among the Igbo, medicine could either be prophylactic (preventive) or therapeutic (curative).

The Igbo believe that the power to heal all diseases belong exclusively to *Chukwu* hence such names as:

Chikadibia - God is greater than the physician.

Chijindu - Life is in the hand of God.

But *Agwu*, as the tutelary divinity of medicine and magic, presides over the practice of traditional medicine. It is usually represented in the art by its chosen agent the *dibia*.

According to Obinna, there are basically three types of *dibia* - the *dibia afe* (diviner), *dibia aja* (priest) and *dibia ogwu* (medicine man).⁹ The three types of *dibia* satisfy the three crucial needs of the Igbo which include:

- (a) to ascertain the will of the spirits especially in problem-situation, to find out who and what were responsible for the problem and to find out what spiritual measures had to be taken to solve the problem and prevent its recurrence,
- (b) to perform the rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies which would nourish the bond between the community and the divinities and thereby promote solidarity and peace among members of the community,
- (c) to protect its members from spiritual and physical molestation and machination of all kinds.

Education 1989 Ahiajoku Colloquium Lecture (Owerri: Ministry of Information 1989), p. 42.

A. J. U. Obinna, "Religion and Igbo Traditional Education" Igbo Traditional Education 1989 Ahiajoku Colloquium Lecture (Owerri: Ministry for Information 1987), p. 67.

It is worthy to note that one person could perform the different functions. In problem situations the Igbo prefer consulting a person who could perform the three different functions of ascertaining the will of the divinities, sacrificing to the divinities and knowing the medicinal values of different herbs. This is because they believe that such a *dibia* could find out the metaphysical causes of the problem and could offer the appropriate sacrifices before treating the organic cause with the herbs.

Usually diseases are believed to be caused various forces, and for the Igbo, the cause may be metaphysical or organic. It is metaphysical when the cause is identified with the supernatural agent but when the cause is identified with things like germs, the disease is said to be organically caused. When a disease is metaphysically caused it is believed it could only be cured when sacrifices are offered to the metaphysical agent. This is in line with Okoro's view that:

Igbo ethnomedicine shares with other indigenous systems two causality concepts. The major concept is personalistic disease being seen as punishment against a person by offending deities or ancestors or as aggression directed against a person by witches and sorcerers hired or actions independently. The minor concept is naturalistic disease being ascribed to loss of the soul from fright to spirit possession or the intrusion of an object into the body.¹⁰

Medicine can be classified under personal and public aspects as well as protective and offensive. Protective here embraces herbs and magical charms objectively used to protect and secure life. Broadly medicine may be classified under good and bad medicine, that is, those for saving or protecting of life (good medicines) and those which are negatively used to cause suffering and chaos (bad medicines). Medicines may be physical/physiological or spiritual/psychological. Whereas the physical/physiological mainly involves oral and external administration of herbal mixture, the spiritual/psychological is mystic and involves sacrifices the use of magical preparation, incantations, invocations and prayers.

3. Process of Traditional Treatment

In the treatment of any serious sickness the starting point is usually

¹⁰A. N. Okoro 1988, p. 67ff.

divination. This is the process of gaining secret knowledge especially about past, present and future events through the aid of spiritistic occult powers. It is the act of obtaining information about unknown happenings from supernatural sources by means of signs and occult techniques. Through this process *Agwu* is consulted for inspiration, information and guidance. Through divination the cause of the disease, how it will be cured and in some cases the special herb to be used are revealed.

The art of healing has been traditionally associated with the thorough knowledge of the use of herbs and roots and appropriate rituals. Ritual washing is one of the acts that punctuate the whole process of making the patient whole. Through rituals the medicine man tries to re-establish cordial relationship with the deities and the ancestors. Religious rituals ward off unfriendly spirits and usually enhance the powers of the friendly ones to revitalise the efficacy of the medicines.

Besides the use of herbs and medicines, diagnosis in Igbo traditional medicine includes socio-cultural analysis of the patient's situation so that therapy is occasionally only an avenue of cementing fragmented relationship. The relationship may be between individuals and the offended spirits.

The nature and the seriousness of the patient's sickness always determine the procedure for medical consultation under the traditional health care system. Usually chronically ill and incapacitated patients stay with the medicine man until recovery but for acute and non-incapacitating sickness healers are often called to the patient's home. The place and time of treatment depends on the nature of the disease.

4. Problems of Traditional Medicine and Healing

In spite of recent successes that are registered by traditional medical practitioners, especially in the area of bone setting, the system is still fraught with problems, which limit its scope to compete favourably with western orthodox medical healing.

The practitioners of traditional medicine still keep their therapeutic techniques and discoveries out of the reach of any other persons including professional colleagues. This myth of secrecy, which shrouds the whole practice, makes outsiders doubt the authenticity of the claims of the

therapy and the genuineness of the procedure. The notion of secrecy makes the traditional healing a secret cult where some dupes can hide and cheat some helpless citizens.

The problem of environment under which the medicines are administered and under which the healing is carried out needs to be improved. In most cases the environment lacks any sanitary care. There is no concept of sterilisation. Also therapy for some diseases varies from one traditional healer to the other. Some of the methods are rational, scientific and open while others are mystical and psychological as well as subjective.

Equally there is no generally accepted quantity of a particular concoction, which a patient of a particular age and weight could take. Often it seems each medicine man gives out his own medicine to patients as he likes and the traditional medicine man claims to heal all sorts of disease.