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CHRISTIANITY, COLONIALITY, AND URHOBOTRADITIONAL MEDICINE

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ABSTRACT

Urhobo Traditional Medicine (UTM) like other African traditional medicine, of which it is part has suffered from vilification by European colonial adventurers and many early Christian missionaries who came to Urhobo land. The Whiteman, that is the European colonizers saw very little good in African culture, if any at all. They saw Urhobo like other African cultures as demonic, satanic, and evil. The abiding influence of this attitude has continued as coloniality, in which our people continue to look down on many aspects of African culture, especially traditional medicine. This paper examines UTM in the light of the colonial and early missionary Christian attitude. The paper uses critical analytic and hermeneutics methods to examine, evaluate, and examine the importance of UTM and medical knowledge. The paper finds that UTM is discounted and devalued because of the negative Christian and colonial attitudes. The paper concludes that UTM should be fostered and promoted, and if this is done it will help to secure a healthier society.

Keywords: Christianity, Coloniality, Indigenous knowledge, Medicine, Tradition, Urhobo

INTRODUCTION

The devastating impact of European colonial adventure in Africa; and the pedagogical excesses of some Western missionaries who saw African culture as inferior continue to inform the poor state of the development of African traditional medicine, of which Urhobo traditional medicine is an arm. Coupled with this is the negative attitude that many African people, especially some Christians have toward African traditional medicine. Seeing it as inferior medicine that is pagan and demonic has gravely hindered the development of African traditional medicine. The paper agrees with the United Nations (2007) in Article 24 of the

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that: "Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services" (p.18). The United Nations (2007) states further in Article 31 that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural

expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions (pp. 22-23).

This paper considers the Urhobo people as indigenous for the land they presently inhabit in Nigeria they have inhabited from time immemorial and they are not foreigners to that land. Their traditional medicine and medical knowledge are equally indigenous to them. Kekeghe (2022) rightly notes that: “The subject of health is evidently the most significant aspect of humanity, which is conveyed in all cultural expressions, including artistic traditions. By implication, the state of one’s physical and mental well-being is pivotal to one’s existence and productivity in the social domain” (p. 61). It is from the fact of the crucial significance of health and medicine that this paper revolves. The paper uses hermeneutics and critical analysis to examine, evaluate, and argue for the importance of Urhobo traditional medicine. It argues also for the need for the biases and prejudices against UTM especially from colonial and Christian-inspired forces to be eradicated. In carrying out the task of the paper, conceptual clarifications will be

made, followed by an examination of some aspects or issues regarding UTM. The issues regarding coloniality and Christianity in relation to UTM will then be examined. Then the way forward in promoting UTM will be offered before the paper is brought to an end.

Conceptual Clarifications

The Urhobo people live mainly in the Western part of the River Niger in present-day Delta State. Darah (2014) writes that: “The Urhobo nation with a population of about two million (2006) is the most populous in Delta State and the western Niger Delta of Nigeria. The immediate neighbours of the Urhobo are the Isoko to the east, the Ukwuani to the northeast and Edo (Bini) to the north, and the Ijaw to the south and the Itsekiri to the southwest” (p. 54). The Urhobo people speak the Urhobo language and their culture is the Urhobo culture. Many Urhobo people also speak other languages such as English, French, Spanish, Pidgin, etc. The Urhobo land is embedded in the Niger Delta and is rich in oil and gas resources.

According to Magesa (1997),
...specialists in medicine, known as herbalists or medicine-doctors are people with knowledge of herbs, roots or even fruits with the power to present or cure disease or other afflictions. Because medicine-doctors, men and women, often rely on divination for their practice, it is sometime difficult to distinguish between diviners and ‘pure’ medicine-doctors. It is also important to note that medicine-doctors who use their

medicine to harm others are regarded as sorcerers (p. 188).

The medicine and medical knowledge that this paper is concerned about is the one that uses herbs and other aspects of nature to restore and protect life. The concern of this paper is not divination, which will be critically assessed and evaluated in another paper in relation to Christianity. The concern also is not with sorcery. Christian faith condemns both. Many medicine men and women rely on knowledge from their ancestors, the power of the supreme being, and their relationship with the supreme being to know which herbs to use. According to Ubrurhe (2001), Urhobo traditional medicine is the medicine that comes from the ancestors based on customary methods in which Urhobo people used nature to heal and prevent sickness, both physical, social, or mental. UTM is one of African traditional medicine. Ndubisi and Kanu (2021) write that: "African traditional medicine is a form of holistic healthcare system that provides healthcare services based on culture, religious background, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs prevalent in a particular African community" (p.137).

Fokunang et al (2011) state that: "Traditional medicine refers to health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal, and mineral based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques, and exercises, applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain well-being" (p. 284). Oyedele (2007) cites the definition of traditional medicine by the World Health Organisation (as recorded in the

Encyclopedia Britannica) that traditional medicine "is the total combination of knowledge and practices whether explicable or not used in diagnosing, preventing or eliminating physical, mental or social diseases" (p.468).

Another key concept in this research is coloniality, which this paper considers to be one of the factors militating against the growth of Urhobo traditional medicinal knowledge and practice. But it is essential to understand coloniality to equally understand related concepts like colonialism and decolonization and decoloniality. University of Bristol (n.d) describes colonialism as the systemic exploitation of the resources, land, and people of the colonized society, while decolonization refers to the formal time when formal colonialism was dismantled; and formal colonialism has been dismantled the influence and impact of colonialism continues and the process of trying to undo that influence is called decoloniality.

Atuire (2023) cites Osterhammel to define colonialism as a domination relationship between a majority indigenous group of people and an invading foreign minority, that takes decisions, controls the local majority population from the metropolis for the interest of the invading foreigners, and also sees themselves as superior to the indigenous population. One of the greatest evils that happened in human civilization is colonialism. While there were some good that came with colonialism, by and large, it was a devastating and degrading venture that dehumanized indigenous peoples and their cultures. Atuire (2023) writes that

colonialism destroys the agency of so-called colonized people, and causes ecocide, genocide, and epistemicide, and these negative effects of colonialism are continued in coloniality, even though the colonizers are no longer physically present. Coloniality could simply be understood as the abiding influence of colonialism.

Some Aspects of Urhobo Traditional Medicine

The paper has noted that Urhobo traditional medicine is part of African traditional medicine. Many of the features of African traditional medicine also apply to Urhobo traditional medicine. Oyedele (2007) cites Elujoba in stating that African traditional medicinal therapies can be in “the form of liquid (... infusions, oily mixtures... etc) solid (e.g powder, ant-heap earth, ointments, powdered dried herb for internal administration with hot maize pap or other drinks) or gaseous (e.g steam inhalation preparations, fumigation like incense, etc)” (p. 468).

To understand Urhobo traditional medicine, it is important to understand Urhobo cosmology or worldview, as Ubrurhe (2001) affirms. In Urhobo cosmology there is the universe which is called Akpo (life) is created by the supreme being. God created all things, plants, trees, animals, birds, and other non-human realities for the good and welfare of human beings. God is not the only supernatural or spiritual power in the universe. Ubrurhe (2001) writes that: “...Oghene is not only the Creator and sustainer of the world but also the ultimate source and end of morality. He therefore created the *edjo* and *erha* (divinities) as His functionaries and intermediaries between

Himself and man”(p. 26). According to Ubrurhe (2001), divinities can reveal to humans potent and healing medicine. Urhobo people also believe in the cult of their ancestors. Ancestors were once human beings who lived moral lives, lived long lives, and did not die abominable deaths. Ubrurhe (2001) who produced a book on *Urhobo Traditional Medicine* is helpful again when he asserts that in Urhobo conception the entire universe is imbued with life force and this life force can be harnessed for the good of humans and medicine man can communicate with trees, herbs, etc to use them for the benefit of human persons. The entire cosmos is permeated with the power of the supreme being, the almighty. As it is in Urhobo theology, nature exists for human utility.

The African worldview of interpreting sickness and disease from the spiritual angle is also prevalent among the Urhobo people. Certainly, not all sicknesses and diseases have a spiritual dimension in terms of being caused by the spirits. But there are sicknesses attributable to the spirit world. If one has committed an abomination such as incest and other serious sexual sins and one falls sick it is believed that the person is being visited by the ancestors. There is a place for confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the African health system. This is how it is also among the Urhobo. The Urhobo believe that sacrifices can be offered to the ancestors (*Esemo*), for sickness arising especially from sin to be taken away.

Urhobo traditional medicine takes many forms and methods. Ubrurhe (2001) names some as herbalism (use of herbs and at times animal parts or insects), *Eghworo*

(massage), *Ame vwo nyoma* (hydrotherapy) *Ohwevwechiro* (fasting), *Uboemu/Egho* (cupping or blood-letting), *Oma evuvwo* (heat therapy), *Omebere* (surgery), and *Esivwo re esegbuyota* (faith healing).

In Urhobo traditional medicine many persons have been healed and brought back to health with hydrotherapy. For the treatment of malaria and many forms of fever, the leaves of plants like pawpaw, *dogonyaro*, plantain, and other leaves are boiled and at high temperatures, the sick person covers himself/herself with thick clothes with his open body facing the heat from the pot or basin while inhaling the water from the pot. The sick person is often asked to drink the water. Malaria and fever can also be put at bay by drinking a small quantity of root in a bottle mixed with alcohol every day. What is said here is not to prescribe to anyone what is to be done when you are sick. When one is sick one should consult the appropriate and recognized medical practitioner, western or traditional. The prescription described is for the sake of this research to show that traditional medicine has its place in the health system.

That colonial attitude that sees everything African as evil and pagan has also affected Urhobo traditional medicine. It is rare to see Christians in Urhobo land speak of Urhobo traditional medicine with pride. There are many Christians in Urhobo land who consult Urhobo medicine doctors or herbalists, but they dare not speak about it. They hide to go and see the herbalist especially when the Western medicine they have used is not working. They do it in shame and feel guilty

as they make use of traditional medicine. This is so because there is false propaganda that has been sold to people associating all traditional medicine with juju, charms, magic, or divination.

A word needs to be said on the denigration of Urhobo culture and by extension UTM by many educated elites and many Christians. Okpako (2014) has argued that elites have despised African traditional medicine just as they have despised African traditional institutions. Omosor (2019) from his research states that his interactions with several Christians reveal that there are Christians who see African traditional healing systems as demonic, satanic, and evil and vowed never to make use of them seeing them as disobedience to God. In Urhobo traditional medicine like African traditional medicine, natural elements such as trees, plants, seeds, and leaves, are used in healing. Words of incantation are used to bring healing and deliverance to people. I remember while growing up how my auntie used raw pepper to heal a big cut on the top of my leg. Oyedele (2007) states that in the use of soil, water, clay, prayers, herbs, oil, power over positions, and use of words there are many parallels between African traditional healing therapies and the bible; and all these calls for openness and dialogue between African tradition and Christians, instead of pouring aspersions on African traditional therapies, the need for mutual co-existence, and the need to improve and develop African traditional therapies, especially in making it neat, clean and accurate.

Christianity, Coloniality, and Urhobo Traditional Medicine

The predominant medicine and medicinal knowledge that the colonizers imposed on indigenous people, like the Urhobo people was Western medicine. Though Urhobo traditional medicine was still practiced by Urhobo people it was suppressed and sidelined. The educational curriculum that the colonizers operated was dominated by Western knowledge with no room for the celebration of indigenous knowledge.

Painfully epistemicidal injustice continues. In the experience of this present author, most of his schooling days there was very little space for indigenous knowledge. And even in most of our schools and universities today, what is taught is Western epistemologies. Western scientific frameworks pervade education in Africa. While it is true that there can be things learned from the West that we have gained from Western medicine, this does not mean the indigenous should be abandoned. If the same attention that is given to promoting Western scientific knowledge in Africa today is given to promoting indigenous knowledge, especially medicinal knowledge, indigenous medicine would have greatly advanced. Atuire (2023) argues for the need for epistemic justice in questioning who is producing the knowledge in science, who runs and operates health institutions, what is considered knowledge, and whose voices are heard in the production of medical knowledge.

Kanu (2015) argues that the Europeans and the European missionaries with few exceptions saw nothing good in African

culture, they tagged African culture as superstition, pagan, salvage, and barbaric and worked to change it by imposing European culture on Africa. In condemning African culture, African medicine which was a core aspect of African culture was condemned. This is what also happened to Urhobo traditional medicine. Unfortunately, this negative and ignorant mindset of the Europeans and early European missionaries has also pervaded and permeated Christianity, especially Pentecostal Christianity. In the preaching of many pastors schooled in poor bible school curricula, African culture suffers from daily and weekly condemnation and name-calling. I have heard of pastors and other religious ministers in Urhobo land calling anything that has to do with African culture evil, demonic, to be shunned, and all who show any interest in them will go to hell. For them to take any form of African medicine shows a lack of faith and trust in God. Some can tolerate Western medicine but never traditional medicine. Any object that has to do with African medicine is to be burnt and buried.

In the Judeo-Christian story, traditional medicine was not condemned. It is a misreading of scripture to affirm that the bible condemns traditional medicine. What the bible condemns is the abuse or misuse of traditional medicine, misuse of herbs, etc. What is condemned in the bible is sorcery, witchcraft, making of charms, etc. It is crucial to assert that African traditional medicine should not be equated with these. It is true that in some African cultures, these are confused as aspects of African traditional medicine. I have not seen or read

of an African society that encourages the works of witches, sorcerers, or the misuse of charms to harm people. Africans are lovers of life and value human life. Those who practiced any art that harmed fellow human beings were seen as anti-social, wicked people and condemned by society. Mbiti (1991) rightly writes that in African societies bad magic, sorcery, and witchcraft were seen as enemies of society, and there are places in Africa where they are beaten to death. It is important to note right away that while this was permissible in the past, extra-judicial killing of any fellow human being no matter the accusation is unacceptable today. As African medicine is condemned so all UTM.

African societies encouraged the use of all forms of medicine for good and not to harm another. In the scriptures, God ministered healing through the use of herbal medicinal portions and mixtures from the natural things that God created. In Genesis 1 he commanded that humans were to use the seeds and plants as food. King Hezekiah was asked by God through the prophet Isaiah to use herbs for his healing (2 Kings 20:7). The book of Sirach chapter 38 (found in the Catholic edition of the bible, and in the other ecumenical editions, like the Good News edition in the deuterocanonical section), doctors are praised for their skills which come from God, the skill and knowledge that makes them make herbal products and make various mixtures to cure sickness and diseases. In Ezekiel 47 and Rev 22, the leaves of trees are for the healing of the nations. Jesus healed the blind man with mud (John 9:1-7). He permitted being anointed with olive oil/ointment which has healing powers

(Matthew 26:6-13). He used spittle to heal (Mark 8:22-26). He used his spoken words (which had incantational powers) to heal people. Healing flowed from him through his garment to the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5). In 2 Kings 5, Naaman, army commander of Syria is healed by dipping in the waters of the river Jordan seven times. In 2 Kings 2:19-22, prophet Elijah healed the poisoned water by administering salt. Omosor (2019) states many traditional healing methods are consistent with biblical values and principles, Even if they are not in line with biblical position, the important thing is that they are theistic and foster authentic humanistic values and human flourishing, for not all that is good and healthy is recorded in the bible. Many people fail to understand that the health and healing systems in the bible followed the traditional medicine of the Hebrew people and not Western medicine. Urhobo people have a right to their traditional medicine though it should be subjected to critical appreciation. Many of the medicine and healing products from China, India, and other Asian countries that people champion today and inundate the Nigerian markets are traditional medicines that have been updated and upgraded.

It is in line with biblical teachings that the Catholic Church looks favourably at traditional medicine. The church does not condemn whatever is good and beautiful in traditional medicine. The Holy See (1992) enunciates that: "God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities

tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other”(no 340). The implication is that humans can make use in a prudent manner natural creatures. Paul (1965) affirms that the Catholic Church values with esteem whatever is good and noble even in on-Christian religions and cultures.

It is important to state that traditional medicine should not be equated with idolatry, superstition, and paganism as some Christians do. They condemn everything associated with it. Olusakin (2022) writes: “In African societies, witches are perceived as enemies of the society causing ill-health, bad luck and all sorts of misfortunes. Hence, any inhuman treatment directed to them is seen as an act to rid the society of its enemies” (p. 117). Umeh and Ezeaka (2024) cite K Dirk to show that in many African societies, witches were ostracised, killed, or isolated from the community. Writing of magical powers, Kanu (2015) says that they can be used to manipulate supernatural powers for good or evil. Whatever is manipulated for evil, that evil is condemned by almost if not all African societies. The evils or bad that may be found in African traditional culture are aberrations that should be condemned. As they are condemned, this should not warrant condemning all of African religious culture and traditional medicine. While it is true that Christianity may disagree with some aspects of Urhobo traditional healing, the concern here is that the many good aspects of Urhobo traditional medicine should be promoted by Christianity. Even Christianity, such as Catholic Christianity disagrees with

reproductive technologies that involve contraception, artificial birth control, etc. Despite this Catholic Christianity speaks and supports the good aspects of Western medicine. That there may be some aspects of Urhobo traditional medicine not acceptable to Christianity should not be an excuse to ignore it. Herbal medicine is well received in the Catholic Church and there is Pax Herbal Laboratories in Ewu-Ishan, Nigeria, run by the Benedictine monk, Fr Anselm Adodo that specializes in the production of African medicine.

Way Forward in Promoting UTM

Kanu (2015) states that African traditional medicine is still very relevant despite the spread of Christianity; and many people, even church people continue to consult African traditional medical practitioners. Though it has faced enormous challenges as outlined above, African traditional medicine of which Urhobo traditional medicine is a part remains resilient. It needs to be protected and maintained. It is important to recognize that ethnic groups or the people of a culture have a right to their traditional medicine and to protect it.

Urhobo traditional medicine like all African traditional medicine should be integrated with Western medicine. Whatever is good in both should be accepted and developed upon. It has been proven that Urhobo traditional medicine is very effective in the treatment of mental sickness among many others. There is no reason why this should not be encouraged. I have had the experience of writing for a mentally sick person to be evacuated by a government agency. Through their direction, the person

was taken to a traditional medical healing home that specializes in psychiatric cases. After treatment, there was clear evidence of healing in the person. I have seen people taken to traditional psychiatric homes who recovered rapidly. Urhobo traditional medicine should not be sidelined and ignored. Western medicine is not necessarily better than Urhobo traditional medicine. Each has its beauty and good, each also has defects.

There have been cases of people who consulted orthodox medicine but the medical doctors with all their skills and machines could not diagnose anything, yet the person is dying. When the person consulted traditional healers, the problems were discovered and treatment given. There is also the issue of the spiritual domain that Western medicine is unable to discern such as demonic possessions, spiritual attacks, etc. Kekeghe (2022) writes that there is a socio-spiritual dimension to healthcare management among the Urhobo people. There is the sickness that requires the mediation of the traditional priests, elders, parents, etc.

Christianity needs to be proactive in educating its followers on the value of Urhobo traditional medicine. There is nothing wrong with the genuine use of traditional medicine. The tendency to condemn traditional medicine by Christian preachers is unacceptable. Christian ministers need to be trained on the value of dialogue, inter-religious dialogue, and tolerance. Okunade (2007) notes that the great bible commentator Matthew Henry commenting on the healing of King Hezekiah says that we should not replace God with

physicians, but the endeavours of the physician are in place as far as it is subordinated to God. Healing can be by natural means (medicine-traditional or Western) or supernatural means (prayer). Many ministers of the bible have been miseducated on the true meaning of the Bible. The Bible does not abrogate what is good in culture.

Urhobo traditional medicinal values, like all African medicinal values, should be subjected to critical evaluation, and not accepted as it is. No human culture is perfect. There are no medicinal values that are all good. Gyekye (1996) in concluding his work on African cultural values, argues that: "A new, adequate, and sustained interest in science and scientific outlook must be cultivated and pursued to provide a firm and viable base for modern technology and developments in the traditional African technologies. The cultivation of a scientific and technological outlook is imperative if Africa is to participate significantly in the modern world"(p.174). Advocating for Urhobo traditional medicine is not a naïve adoption of everything that constitutes Urhobo traditional medicine. As noted previously Urhobo traditional medicine should be separated from superstition, witchcraft, magic, unhygienic environments, etc. Urhobo traditional medical products can be packaged with more aesthetics, designs, and beauty put in the products. There are things that in its present form Urhobo traditional medicine cannot discern because of the lack of modern technological equipment. This is where there is a need for synergy and openness. More research needs to be done on this. It is the practice today in

some traditional centers of bone settings for the bone setters to ask the person to go and do an x-ray before they come. There should be a collaboration between Urhobo and Western forms of medicine. None should be looked down upon. None of them is superior to the other, but each of them has its place. The scientific and technological mindset that Gyeke called for should be adopted, why subjecting that scientific and technological framework to ethical values.

There is a need for serious awareness to be created to dissociate Urhobo traditional medicine from the false colonial propaganda that has been meted against it. The attitude and practice of Christianity in Urhobo land towards UTM should be one of acculturation or inculturation, depending on the term that is acceptable to your tradition. Eze (2014) has rightly noted that all through the centuries Christianity has always acculturated and accepted elements from the culture such as by adopting Jewish festivals from the Old Testament, adopting December 25th from the Roman Empire a day that the sun god was worshipped; and since all the earth and its fullness belongs to God as incited in Psalms 24 verse 1, Christianity should continue to adapt from culture. In Catholic traditions, they speak rather of inculturation rather than acculturation. Inculturation is incarnating Christianity. Just as Jesus Christ became a human being and grew up in a human culture eating the food from that culture, so also Christianity must grow in a culture and take up from that culture whatever is good

and holy from it. When it comes to inculturating values and practices from Urhobo traditional medicine into Christianity, there is still much that the church in Urhobo land and beyond needs to do. Chavunduka (1999) writes: “The way forward for the Christian church is to examine carefully African religion and medicine and other cultural aspects, with a view to identifying clearly those practices that are not against Christian faith and morals and incorporate them into modern medicine and Christian worship.”

Conclusion

The paper examined UTM in light of the influence of Christianity and coloniality. It showed that UTM like African traditional medicine has been vilified and denigrated. It was not that the wrong colonial attitude of seeing almost everything African as evil, demonic, and satanic has equally informed the way that people look at Urhobo traditional medicine. The paper showed that this attitude and behaviour towards UTM is wrong and unacceptable. Many things done in UTM are akin to biblical healing systems following the traditional medicine of the Hebrew people. It was argued that Western medicine is not superior to UTM. UTM is not a perfect form of medicine and should be subjected to critical evaluation and critiqued by scientific and technological frameworks that are ethical. Christianity in Urhobo land and beyond has a special role to play in promoting UTM. As this is done a more healthier society will be created in Urhobo land and beyond.

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