

PROVERBS AS KNOWLEDGE BEARERS: TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AMONG PRELITERATE IGBO SOCIETY OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The literary icon, Prof. Chinua Achebe observed in his work, Things Fall Apart, that among the Igbo, proverbs are the palm oil with which words were eaten. Implicit in this statement is the notion that the Igbo attach a lot of importance to proverbs and that proverbs serve as a lubricant to their “rusting” memories. One of such importance is noticed in their use of proverbs to keep alive their traditional medical practices which is at the verge of extinction consequent on the introduction of orthodox medicine by the western world. For instance, there is this Igbo proverb that says that when the gods inflict one with boils, they are demanding from the victim items like palm oil, the excreta (white) of a lizard, and the shell of Dura brand of palm kernel. This proverb gives one an insight into the pharmacopeia of boil among the Igbo even though it is salient on how they are prepared and used. This is in tandem with another proverb that emphasizes expertise. The saying that ofeke mara mgborogu nwa dibia, enweghi ihe omere nwa dibia. This translates as the uninformed that knows the roots of plants used by the traditional medicine man have not in any harmed him or his business. This means that knowing the roots without knowing how they are prepared, applied or used makes no meaning. There are other proverbs that relate to sexually transmitted diseases, natal and post-natal care for both humans and their domestic animals. Due to the fading of this ancient profession, it is imperative that the knowledge provided by proverbs be explored to help in salvaging this endangered profession. Preserving such knowledge would be of immense importance to the health and economy of the nation as it would generate employment, reduce the amount of money spent on procuring herbal medicine from overseas. Here then lies the import of this paper.

Keywords: Knowledge, traditional medicine, health care, sexually transmitted diseases

INTRODUCTION

Traditional medicine according to Kenneth Little refer to any concrete object possessing mystical powers which can be used for positive or negative purposes. Such objects which must have some therapeutic potentials could be the root of a plant, a leaf, the bark of a tree, animal dung, feather or hairs, or other items held sacred by virtue of its association or connection with visible forces¹. Such medicine could be used to offer protection to life and property, to detect and check evildoers and for peaceful settlement of cases. Another important aspect of traditional medicine among the Igbo is its link with their religious practices and magic. Thus, it is common to see a healer talking to a tree or stone- defying the material obstacle of the object to appeal to the spirit within, to control and exploit it for the benefit of his patients². Therefore, an understanding of the

proverbs used by the Igbo to perpetuate their traditional medical knowledge must take into account the entire belief system and notions about sickness.

Proverbs in the words of Finnegan is a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw³. Among the Igbo, Ugonna⁴ states that proverbs can be conceived as a kind of mirror which reflects human experience. Noah went a step further to note that proverbs generally do not only authenticate opinion and heighten interest in stories, but also add ornaments to stories⁵. One of such ornaments is that of a healthy life attained through the preservation of the knowledge of traditional medicine which proverbs of Igbo extraction offers. Areas where proverbs have helped in preserving the knowledge of traditional medicine will be discussed in themes hereunder.

BOILS

In Igboland the name for boil is *etuto*, *esuse depending on ones dialect*. Among the Igbo of Nsukka Division from where the majority of the proverbs were drawn, there is a proverb that *mmanu choo mmanu, ikekere okpurukpu aki n'ekere ngwere, O tureshigide imenye esuse*⁶. This translates as, when the gods want palm oil, the shell of Dura brand of palm kernel, and the white excreta of lizard, it inflicts people with boils. These items, till date, form part of the major pharmacopeia in the cure of boils among the Nsukka peoples of Lejja, Opi, Ede Oballa, Enugu-Ezike, Abbi and Ugbeleajima. First, the shell of the palm kernel is turned into charcoal using broken clay pot. The broken clay pot was placed on fire and heated for some time (about ten minutes). While the clay pot was on fire, the shells of the kernel were put inside the clay pot to ensure that it turned into charcoal. The charcoal so produced was grinded together with the white excreta of lizard. After the grinding, palm oil was added to the ground substances to form a cream or paste. The mixture was robbed on the boil. Local testimonies claimed that the pain generated by the boil got reduced within a short period after the medication was applied to the boil. The present writer met a man who had boils full of pus and was ready to burst open. The man claimed to have used this medication but added salt to the mixture. He claimed that the mixture had the power of softening the inflammation within a period of about two days of persistent use of the medication⁷.

Granted that the procedures explained her did not reflect in the proverb, the proverb mentions almost all the necessary ingredients used in the cure of boils. What is left for modern day scientists is to test for the active ingredients in the mixture with a view to finding what the active ingredients are. With that done they can mass produce such medication at commercial quantity.

For the treatment of boils also, there is this proverb that *mmanu n'unu new esuse k'Amadi nwe Ohu*⁸. Palm oil and salt are masters to boils as the free citizens are to slaves. In this case, they mixed few drops of red oil palm with a type of salt called *unu nde* and dropped the fluid like mixture on the surface of the boil. Within about seven to eight hours, the boil would burst open and pus seen dripping from it. The dripping of pus signaled the beginning of healing of the ailment⁹.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

The use of herbal medicine in the cure of sexually transmitted diseases is common among the Igbo. They preserve the knowledge using their proverbs. For instance, the saying that *ukwu n,edu orie okwu mgbe lile kworu mbarugba n'manya oku*¹⁰. This translates literally as, the waist

that patronize harlots always has its hope hinged on *Aichornea cordifolia*(*Mbarugba*) and hot drink. As is usual with proverbs, the waist her is metaphorical as it represents the human element- the victim of the disease while the harlot is there as the vector and transmitter of the disease. As is usual with traditional medical practice and secrecy, this proverb gave insight on what can be used in the cure of venereal diseases but neither did it state the type of infection they are used for nor how the items are used. The omission is deliberate and is justified by another proverb that has it that *Uwa malu ihe nwa dibia ma, agu egbu nwa dibia*¹¹ – if the knowledge of the traditional doctor is made public, the traditional doctor would go hungry.

In the case of the items mentioned above in connection with the cure of sexually transmitted diseases, the root of the plant is boiled under intense heat for about three hours. After, the heating and cooking, the substance obtained looked like red wine. The drug which is the result of cooking the root was mixed with locally brewed hot drink called *kai kai*. This particular medication and process had been proved to be very effective in the cure of gonorrhoea¹². The use of traditional medicine in the cure of sexually transmitted diseases had been adjudged as the best. The quote below relating to the cure of staphylococcus is a case in point.

*Herbs and roots are the best treatment to avoid occurrence and re-occurrence, because it cannot be cured with injection or any antibiotics only. Because this bacteria's like staphylococcus, E-coli, Cleibsella etc. have developed resistance to all forms of western antibiotics and this antibiotic destroy beneficial bacteria that is useful to your system while dangerous bacteria like "staph" and E-coli are left to destroy your system*¹³.

The above quote underscores the need to preserve the knowledge of traditional medicine.

NATAL CARE

Reproductive health medicine is very important among the Igbo. This is one area where traditional medicine is pronounced in veterinary practices. The proverb that *ewu mkpa ukwu waru eha anyachu*¹⁴ - a goat with contracted pelvis is demanding for *Glyphaea brevis*- indicate that among the Igbo, whenever a goat is found having difficulties in giving birth to young ones either because the size of the kid is big or that the pelvic of the goat in labor is not large enough to enhance easy and quick delivery, they resorted to the use of *Anyachu*. In this case, the leaf of the plant is squeezed and mashed in water to produce a very slippery substance. After the mashing, the chaff is sieved and thrown away. The fluid- like substance resulting from the mashing was poured directly into the vulva of the animal. The slippery nature of the drug reduces friction and the drug itself is claimed to help in reducing the size of the kid. This sounds like a fairy tale but the practice is wide spread. What the present writer is not sure of is the truth about the reduction of the size of the unborn kid. However, this leaf was mixed with another leaf (name withheld by my informant) to facilitate the enlargement of the pelvic.

In the treatment of animals that had delays in the expulsion of placenta after delivery, the proverb, *Echikara gboru ogu nchokwu n'anu muru nwa ohu* – *Spondia Mombi*(Hug plum) settles the quarrel between the placenta and animals that gave birth to new one newly is resorted to. In this case, the fruits pulp is fed to the animal and this process had been tested by modern scientists and confirmed to facilitate the explosion of the placenta¹⁵.

POST-NATAL CARE

Quite often, one of the major problems experienced by women after delivery is abdominal pains. To ease the pain, the Igbo drew knowledge from one of their proverbs, *Uziza guba nwanyi muru*

nwa ohuru O si n'afo n'egbu ya mgbu- When a woman who delivered a child not too long is desirous to eat *Piper Guineense Schum et Thonn Piperaceae*, she complains of stomach pains. The fruit of the plant is cooked together with yam and served hot to a woman having abdominal pains after delivery¹⁶. Another plant called *Uda (Xyhopia aethiopica A Rich Annonaceae)* is used for the same purpose of treating abdominal pains after delivery¹⁷. Also in the league of medications used in the treatment of post-delivery abdominal pains is hot water and honey as expressed in the proverb *mmiri oku na manu anwu n'edo eho nwanyi omugo-* hot water and honey remedies stomach ache in women who gave birth quite recently. In this case, the Igbo boil water and added honey to the boiled water. The mixture resulting from this combination was applied as a balm on the stomach of the women to relieve the pains.

One other problem noticed after delivery is the inability of some women to breast feed their babies because the breast milk refused to flow. The Igbo use the knowledge embedded in one of their proverbs that posit that *nwanyi ujoo araa bu enyi di ochi*¹⁸ to address the problem. The proverb if translated would mean that a woman whose breast milk refuses to flow immediately after birth is a friend of the palm wine tapper. Based on this proverb, the Igbo offered such women fresh palm wine to drink. Granted that such medication did not take into consideration what may be the side effect of alcohol on the woman and her child as the drink is alcoholic, the end result is that such women ended up producing breast milk as the palm wine induced their bodies to produce the milk.

In the event of animals like goat or sheep having the same problem of delayed lactation, the Igbo boiled the leaf of two plants and used them to press on the udder of the animal for as many times as possible after an interval of about thirty minutes between each exercise. The plants are *Glyphaea brevis and Spondia Mombi*. After, the pressing the animal would begin to lactate. This very knowledge is preserved in their proverb that states as follows; *Anyachu n'echikara bu uruu n'iji ubu anu mmiri araa ya n'egbu oge igba-* *Glyphaea brevis* and *Spondia Mombi*(Hog plum) are the antidote that takes care of animals with delayed lactation.

CONCLUSION

For a long time, the Igbo have used proverbs as an effective literary tool to reflect their socio-cultural milieu and to make authentic portrayal of their life and experience. This must have informed A.A Monye called proverbs “a short-hand in communication”¹⁹. Since proverbs are highly priced by the Igbo, studies on their proverbs should be encouraged. Courses dealing on proverbs should be designed with emphasis on how proverbs are a store of knowledge. As these proverbs provides a convenient lead to scientists, the herbs and materials used in the treatment of each problem should be subjected to laboratory analysis with a view to finding out what the active ingredients in them are, whether they have any side effect on human or animal health and the level of their efficacy. This is in line with the saying that one starts from the known to the unknown. The type of research advocated here is necessary as it would reduce the amount spent buying herbal medicine by Nigerians of Igbo extraction from outside the country especially from China. It would equally generate employment for the citizens especially as the natural resources mentioned by the proverbs are readily available in their society.

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