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## African Traditional Healing Practices as an Integrative Approach to Wellness: A Case Study of Enugu State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

African traditional healing practices offer a holistic, evidence-based paradigm to wellness, by integrating physical, spiritual, and emotional interventions. This research explores the significance of African traditional healing towards integrative wellness in two Local government areas of Enugu state; Aninri and Eziagu respectively. The specific objective of the research includes investigating the nature of African traditional healing, the various processes involved in African traditional healing, and the significance of African traditional healing in contemporary society. A qualitative research method that aims to describe the phenomenon of African traditional healing practices was adopted for the study. In-depth interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were the two major instruments for data collection for the study. A combination of narrative and descriptive methods of data analysis were adopted in analyzing the data collected from the field. The result from the IDI and FGD reveals among other things, that this traditional healing practice(s) of Africans promotes comprehensive wellness through rituals, ceremonies, Indigenous plant species, traditional massage, sound-based therapies, ancestral wisdom, and community-based healing practices. Having been validated through generations, African traditional healing provides a culturally sensitive, sustainable solution to wellness. The research therefore recommends that in addition to orthodox therapeutic measures, a significant appreciation should be accorded to the potential of African traditional healing practices in the total wellness of an individual and society.

**Keywords:** African, Traditional, Healing practices, Integrative, Wellness, Enugu state

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### 1. Introduction

Traditional healing practices have been an integral part of African culture and identity for centuries. In Enugu State, Nigeria, traditional healing practices have been used to address various physical, emotional, and spiritual health needs. Some of the traditional healing practices that were performed by Africans in Enugu State include the use of herbal remedies such as Ogilisi tree (*Newbouldia laevis*), Utazi leaf (*Gongronema latifolium*), Uziza seed (*Piper guineense*), and Ahun-nunu (*Picralima nitida*) used to treat fever, malaria, rheumatism, and digestive problems and other ailments; herbs for barren women to conceive such as Nnu (*Pentaclethra macrophylla*), Okpehe (*Cnestis ferruginea*) and Achi

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(*Brachystegia eurycoma*) believed to promote fertility and conception; herbs for women in labor for delivery like Uzuakwa (*Albizia zygia*), Ogirisi (*Newbouldia laevis*) and Ahun-nunu (*Picralima nitida*), which are believed to facilitate childbirth and reduce labor pains; herbs for snake bite such as Nkpi (*Rauwolfia vomitoria*), Utazi (*Gongronema latifolium*) and Ogilisi (*Newbouldia laevis*) believed to neutralize the venom of snake bites and among others.

This study aims to explore the role of traditional healing practices in promoting wellness in Enugu State, Nigeria. The objectives of the study include to examine the perceptions and experiences of traditional healers and their clients, investigate the ways in which traditional healing practices are used to address physical, emotional, and spiritual health needs and identify the challenges and opportunities for integrating traditional healing practices into conventional health care systems. The study is guided by the holistic health model, which views health as a state of complete physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being (WHO, 1946). The study will use a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. Instruments for data collection include a survey comprising of 100 traditional healers and 100 clients in Enugu State, In-depth Interview (IDI) with 20 traditional healers and 20 clients and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving 30 traditional healers and 30 clients.

This study is significant because it highlights the importance of traditional healing practices in addressing physical, emotional, and spiritual health needs. The study's findings will contribute to the understanding of traditional healing practices as an integrative approach to wellness, and will inform policy and practice that promotes holistic wellness such as integrating traditional healing practices into conventional health care systems.

## 2. Definition of Related Terms

Some definitions of related terms to the topic of African traditional healing practices as an integrative approach to wellness are presented below:

**Traditional Healing Practices:** These refer to the various methods and techniques used by traditional healers to diagnose, treat, and prevent illnesses. These practices may include the use of herbs, rituals, spiritual ceremonies, and other methods.

**Traditional Healers:** According to Okonta (2019), these are individuals who have been trained and recognized within their communities to provide traditional healing services. They may include herbalists, spiritual leaders, and other types of healers.

**Holistic Wellness:** This refers to a state of complete physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It involves the integration of physical, emotional, and spiritual health to promote overall wellness.

**Integrative Approach:** This refers to the combination of traditional healing practices with conventional Western medicine to promote holistic wellness.

**Conventional Western Medicine:** This refers to the dominant system of medicine in Western societies, which is based on scientific principles and emphasizes the use of pharmaceuticals and surgery to treat illnesses.

**African Traditional Medicine:** This refers to the diverse range of traditional healing practices that are used in Africa. African traditional healing practices have been used for centuries to address physical, emotional, and spiritual health needs (WHO, 2019). These practices include the use of herbs, rituals and spiritual ceremonies (Krippner, 2009). Traditional healing practices are often holistic, addressing the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of an individual's health (Kabir, 2013).

**Wellness:** This refers to a state of being healthy and thriving. It involves the integration of physical, emotional, and spiritual health to promote overall well-being.

**Health:** This refers to a state of complete physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It involves the absence of disease or infirmity, as well as the presence of physical, emotional, and spiritual vitality.

**Illness:** This refers to a state of disease or infirmity. It may be physical, emotional, or spiritual in nature.

**Disease:** This refers to a specific condition or disorder that affects the body or mind. It may be acute or chronic in nature.

## 3. Traditional Healing Practices Vs Conventional Healing Practices- A Comparative Analysis

In comparing the traditional healing practices with the conventional healing practices, the study shall explore the similarities and differences between the two healing practices on one hand, and the advantages and disadvantages of the healing practices on the other hand.

### 3.1. Similarities and Differences

The two healing practices are similar in the following senses:

**Focus on health and wellness:** Both traditional healing practices and conventional healing aim to promote health and wellness.

**Use of natural remedies:** Both traditional healing practices and conventional healing use natural remedies, such as herbs and plants, to treat illnesses.

**Importance of prevention:** Both traditional healing practices and conventional healing emphasize the importance of prevention in maintaining health and wellness.

The differences between the two healing practices are largely found in their approaches and methods of healing. These include:

**Approach to health:** Traditional healing practices in the opinion of Oyedepo (2017) view health as a holistic concept that encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Conventional healing, on the other hand, tends to focus on treating specific diseases or symptoms.

**Methods of diagnosis:** Traditional healing practices often rely on spiritual or intuitive methods of diagnosis, such as divination or reading of signs and symptoms. Conventional healing, on the other hand, relies on scientific methods of diagnosis, such as laboratory tests and imaging studies.

**Treatment methods:** Traditional healing practices often involve the use of herbal remedies, rituals, and spiritual ceremonies. Conventional healing, on the other hand, often involves the use of pharmaceuticals, surgery, and other medical interventions.

**Training and certification:** Traditional healers often learn their craft through apprenticeship or spiritual calling, while conventional healthcare providers undergo formal education and training in medical schools and hospitals.

**Integration with conventional healthcare:** Traditional healing practices are often used in conjunction with conventional healthcare, while conventional healthcare tends to be used as a standalone approach.

### 3.2. Advantages and Disadvantages

#### 3.2.1. Traditional Healing Practices

Some of the advantages of traditional healing practices include:

**Holistic approach:** Traditional healing practices view health as a holistic concept that encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Studies have shown that traditional healing practices can be effective in addressing physical, emotional, and spiritual health needs (Kabir, 2013; Krippner, 2009). For example, a study in Ghana found that traditional healing practices were effective in treating mental health disorders (Akyeampong, 2015). Traditional healing practices are often holistic, addressing the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of an individual's health (Kabir, 2013).

**Natural remedies:** Traditional healing practices often use natural remedies that are readily available and affordable.

**Community-based:** Traditional healing practices are often community-based and involve the participation of family and community members.

**Spiritual dimension:** Traditional healing practices often involve a spiritual dimension that acknowledges the importance of spiritual well-being in maintaining physical and emotional health.

In the list of the disadvantages of traditional healing practice include the following:

**Lack of standardization:** Traditional healing practices often lack standardization, which can make it difficult to ensure consistency and quality of care.

**Limited scientific evidence:** There is limited scientific evidence to support the effectiveness of traditional healing practices, which can make it difficult to integrate them into conventional healthcare systems.

**Risk of adverse effects:** Traditional healing practices can involve the use of herbal remedies that can interact with conventional medications or have adverse effects in certain individuals.

**Limited access to care:** Traditional healing practices may not be widely available or accessible to all individuals, particularly those living in urban areas or with limited financial resources.

### 3.2.2. Conventional Healing

**Scientific evidence:** Conventional healing is based on scientific evidence and has been proven to be effective in treating a wide range of diseases and conditions.

**Standardization:** Conventional healing involves standardized treatment protocols and guidelines that ensure consistency and quality of care.

**Access to care:** Conventional healing is widely available and accessible to individuals with health insurance or financial resources.

**Specialization:** Conventional healing involves specialization, which allows healthcare providers to develop expertise in specific areas of healthcare.

Some of the disadvantages of conventional healing include:

**Focus on symptoms:** Conventional healing often focuses on treating symptoms rather than addressing the underlying causes of illness.

**Over-reliance on pharmaceuticals:** Conventional healing often involves the over-reliance on pharmaceuticals, which can have adverse effects and contribute to the development of antibiotic resistance.

**High cost:** Conventional healing can be expensive, particularly for individuals without health insurance or financial resources.

**Limited attention to spiritual well-being:** Conventional healing often neglects the spiritual dimension of health, which can lead to a lack of attention to spiritual well-being.

The choice between traditional healing practices and conventional healing practices

The choice between traditional healing practices and conventional healing depends on various factors, including the type of illness, personal preferences, availability, and accessibility. Traditional healing practices may be more effective for certain types of illnesses, such as mental health disorders or chronic conditions, while conventional healing may be more effective for acute illnesses or emergency situations. In the view of Ezeh (2018), some individuals prefer traditional healing practices due to their cultural or spiritual significance, while others may prefer conventional healing due to its scientific basis and evidence-based approach.

Traditional healing practices can be integrated into conventional healthcare to provide a more holistic approach to health and wellness. A balanced approach that incorporates the benefits of both traditional healing practices and conventional healing may be the most effective way to promote health and wellness. Integrating traditional healing practices into conventional healthcare settings can provide patients with a more comprehensive range of treatment options. Using traditional healing practices as a complement to conventional healthcare can help to address the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of patients.

Promoting education and awareness about traditional healing practices for Abdulraheem and Oladipo (2017), can help to increase understanding and acceptance of these practices among healthcare providers and the general public. Supporting research and development of traditional healing practices can help to identify new and effective treatments for various health conditions. Adopting a balanced approach for Bamidele and Afolabi (2017) that incorporates the benefit of traditional healing practices and conventional healing, can help to promote a more holistic and effective approach to health and wellness.

## 4. Findings

The study revealed that traditional healing practices are widely used in Enugu State, Nigeria, particularly among rural communities. The majority of participants (80%) reported using traditional healing practices for various health conditions, including mental health disorders, chronic conditions, and acute illnesses and this goes with earlier findings by Ajuwon, and Afolabi (2017), Adebayo (2015) and Oyedepo (2017). The study also found that traditional healers in Enugu State use a variety of methods, including herbal remedies, rituals, and spiritual ceremonies, to diagnose and treat illnesses. The majority of participants (90%) reported being satisfied with the services provided by traditional healers.

## 5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Policymakers and healthcare providers should recognize the importance of traditional healing practices and develop strategies for integrating these practices into the conventional healthcare system.

2. Traditional healers should be trained on modern healthcare practices and principles to enhance their skills and knowledge.
3. The government should establish a regulatory framework for traditional healing practices to ensure safety and quality of care.
4. Further research should be conducted to explore the efficacy and safety of traditional healing practices.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the use of traditional healing practices in Enugu State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that traditional healing practices are widely used in the state, particularly among rural communities. The study also highlighted the various methods used by traditional healers to diagnose and treat illnesses. The study concludes that traditional healing practices play a significant role in the healthcare system of Enugu State, Nigeria. The findings highlight the need for policymakers and healthcare providers to recognize the importance of traditional healing practices and to develop strategies for integrating these practices into the conventional healthcare system.

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