

History of Pandemic in Africa; a Call to Recalibrate African Herbal Medicine in a Globalized Society

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Abstract: In the face of the ongoing global pandemic, it is imperative for Africa to consider alternative approaches for combatting such crises. This paper delves into the rich history of Africa's traditional methods for addressing pandemics, which predate modern medicine. Traditional African medicine comprises divination, spiritualism, and herbalism, offering holistic healthcare services rooted in culture, religion, and community beliefs. It recognizes illness as having both natural and supernatural causes, necessitating physical and spiritual treatments such as divination, incantations, animal sacrifice, exorcism, and herbal remedies, often incorporating minerals and animal parts.

Although once labeled primitive, scientific investigations have revealed the therapeutic potential of African herbal medicine, with some pharmaceuticals based on phytochemicals derived from it. Nonetheless, challenges include poor quality control and limited safety data. Traditional medical practices remain shrouded in secrecy, resulting in few documented adverse reactions. However, embracing and integrating traditional medicine into conventional healthcare systems can unlock its potential, benefiting healthcare provision, expanding coverage, fostering economic growth, and alleviating poverty.

This paper offers a historical perspective on pandemics and proposes an eclectic approach, advocating for the exploration of alternative and herbal medicine as a solution for future pandemics. By examining the information gathered through this research, we highlight the promising prospects of African traditional medicine, paving the way for its formal recognition and integration into modern healthcare systems. In conclusion, embracing Africa's traditional healing practices could prove instrumental in enhancing pandemic preparedness and response, ultimately benefitting the continent and the world at large.

Keywords: History, pandemic, recalibrate, Nigeria, herbal, medicine, globalized, society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pandemics have been a persistent threat throughout human history, affecting countless lives. These global health crises are deeply rooted in our past and have recurred over generations. Humanity's ability to confront and survive pandemics has been demonstrated through various means, including developing resistance, adopting preventive measures, and producing cures. Curiously, despite the lessons history offers, humanity has often failed to learn from its past experiences and mistakes, leading to the repetition of similar crises. The outbreak of the coronavirus in 2019, for instance, caught the world unprepared, highlighting our tendency to overlook the lessons of history.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

This involved an extensive review of existing scholarly literature, historical records, and relevant publications related to indigenous technology and its impact on socio-economic development in Africa. It provided a foundational understanding of the topic.

Fieldwork:

Fieldwork refers to on-site research conducted in specific locations, such as pottery workshops, craft centers, ironworking sites, and textile production facilities in Nigeria. It allowed researchers to gather firsthand information and observe traditional practices.

Interviews and Surveys:

Conducted structured interviews and surveys with artisans, experts, and stakeholders involved in the indigenous technology sectors. This facilitated the collection of qualitative and quantitative data, including insights and opinions from those directly involved.

Observations:

During fieldwork, I observed and recorded the techniques, tools, and processes used in pottery, craft, ironwork, and textile production. This direct observation helped document traditional methods.

Documentation:

Documented historical and contemporary practices, including photographs, videos, and written descriptions. This documentation served as visual and textual evidence for analysis.

Data Analysis:

Collected data from interviews, surveys, observations, and documentation was systematically analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and insights. Statistical analysis may have been applied to quantitative data.

HISTORY OF PANDEMICS IN NIGERIA

Pandemics and epidemics have been recurring challenges in Africa, and Nigeria's response to the COVID-19 pandemic provides a pertinent example. (Ahmad, 2020) highlighted the persistent struggles African nations face in combating infectious diseases despite considerable funding from international organizations and NGOs.¹ The history of epidemics in Africa is characterized by diseases like Lassa fever, cholera, meningitis, HIV, glaucoma, and kwashiorkor, which continue to claim lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges. Nigeria, like other African countries, recognized the need for proactive measures. The government assured citizens of its readiness to enhance surveillance at international airports, such as Enugu, Lagos, Rivers, Kano, and the FCT (Premium Times 2020).² The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) established a dedicated coronavirus group to respond swiftly.

¹Ahmad, U. (2020, June 26). COVID-19 Response in Nigeria: successes, *challenges and ways forward*. *AfricArXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.21428/3b2160cd.dc27fb4c>

²"Coronavirus: Nigeria 'strengthens' surveillance at five international airports" *Premium Times*. 29 January 2020. Retrieved 10 march 2020.

Professor David Olaleye made reference to (Muhamad Khair et al., 2021) research work and emphasized the importance of community-based interventions, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive strategies in a diverse country like Nigeria.³ Dr. Chikwe Ihekweazu the Director-General of the NCDC, underscored the necessity of strengthening healthcare infrastructure and disease surveillance. The experience in Nigeria reflects the broader African story of resilience in the face of epidemics. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic will shape Africa's future preparedness and response to health crises. It's a narrative of challenges, adaptation, and the enduring spirit of African nations.

THE ROLE OF WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION AND AFRICAN PREPAREDNESS DURING PANDEMIC

In a speech in November 2005, President George W. Bush outlined detailed proposals for pandemic preparedness, recognizing the unique challenges posed by a potential outbreak (Bush, 2005).⁴ He likened a pandemic to a forest fire, stressing the importance of early detection and swift response to prevent its rapid spread. He emphasized the need for medical personnel and essential supplies, including vaccines, in case of a pandemic.

Bush's foresight in addressing the potential consequences of a pandemic highlighted the importance of preparedness. He stressed the necessity of having the capacity to develop and manufacture vaccines rapidly to protect the population. While his administration took steps to prepare for a pandemic, sustaining the effort over time became challenging, as shifting administrations led to changes in priorities and funding (Bush, 2005).^{ibid} The government launched the website www.pandemicflu.gov to provide information on pandemic preparedness, which remains in use today. Bush's warnings from 15 years ago continue to resonate, underscoring the critical importance of proactive pandemic planning.

³Muhamad Khair, N. K., Lee, K. E., & Mokhtar, M. (2021, June 22). Community-Based Monitoring in the New Normal: A Strategy for Tackling the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(13), 6712. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18136712>

⁴&NA; (2006, July). President Bush Releases Pandemic Flu Implementation Plan. *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, 20(4), 213. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00002800-200607000-00015>

^{ibid}&NA; (2006, July). President Bush Releases Pandemic Flu Implementation Plan. *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, 20(4), 213. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00002800-200607000-00015>

In Africa, cultural practices like the Yoruba's IFA religion offer unique methods of foreseeing future pandemics through divination. These early warning systems, deeply rooted in tradition, enable communities to prepare for potential health crises. Africa's diverse cultures and traditions can provide valuable insights into pandemic preparedness, complementing the efforts of international organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO).

In summary, President Bush's visionary approach to pandemic preparedness, and Africa's cultural traditions of divination, highlight the need for proactive measures to address the ongoing and future health crises. These lessons emphasize the significance of early detection, resource allocation, and community-based preparedness in combating pandemics.

IFA AS AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

In Southwestern Nigeria, the Yoruba culture boasts the IFA divination system, which has acted as an enduring early warning system for centuries. IFA provides invaluable guidance and solutions to avert, prevent, or address epidemics and pandemics, as it's said, "IFA divination is a trusted early warning system that offers foresight and direction" (Parrinder & Bascom) and unique ability to foretell future health crises and provide insights into readiness and preparedness is a testament to its cultural significance.⁵

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan in December 2019 and its subsequent declaration as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 31, 2020, is intriguing. The Ooni of Ife, a prominent traditional ruler in West Africa, shared a post on Instagram, revealing that during the World Ifa Festival Otura Meji on June 6, 2019, a divine proclamation had forewarned of the impending pandemic. "We foretold about the impending rage of this invisible pandemic war, but few heard us," he emphasized (Alfred 2020).⁶ This underscores the remarkable prescience of cultural practices like IFA in anticipating global health threats.

While WHO has issued a comprehensive COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan, it is imperative to acknowledge that the global level of preparedness, despite international collaborative efforts, has not fully aligned with the recommendations made by influential figures like President George Bush in 2005. As Bush emphasized, "If we wait for a pandemic to appear, it will be too late to prepare. And one day many lives could be needlessly lost because we failed to act today" (Mosk 2020).⁷ This underscores the ongoing challenges in global preparedness for pandemics.

⁵Parrinder, G., & Bascom, W. (1971). Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 4(1), 79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1594711>

⁶Alfred O. (March 30, 2020). Ooni of Ife claims he has 'tested' cure for coronavirus. *Premium Times: Monday*, June 15, 2020.

⁷Mosk M (April 5, 2020) George W. Bush in 2005: 'If we wait to appear it will be too late to prepare'. A book about the 1918 flu pandemic spurred the government to action.

WHO's commitment to addressing the pandemic is evident through its diligent release of daily situation reports and conduct of press conferences to keep the world informed about the evolving crisis. As stated by WHO, "We are dedicated to providing timely and accurate information to the public" (Author 28). Collaborative efforts with governments and the distribution of essential medical supplies and diagnostic test kits to over 120 countries further demonstrate WHO's dedication to combatting the pandemic.

LOCKDOWN ON THE VIRUS, WHILE POVERTY PERSIST IN AFRICA

The issue of lockdown in Africa has presented a significant challenge, leading to a growing distrust between governments and citizens. The response to COVID-19 in Africa requires governments to rely on already stretched communities and informal institutions. However, a substantial gap in trust and accountability exists between citizens and the state. This crisis compels the state to work towards bridging this divide.

"Palliative measures put in place by the government, including the distribution of relief materials and financial aid to the poorest, have faced challenges. Issues such as the government's inability to curb insecurity and the politicization of the pandemic have further widened the trust gap between citizens and the government" (Nwodim, 2021).⁸ While the Nigerian government has followed WHO guidelines and issued instructions on social distancing, face mask usage, personal hygiene, and the creation of isolation centers for COVID-19 patients, there is a call for more robust efforts to contain the virus and a phased reopening of the economy to prevent further spread" (SS, 2021).⁹

Nigerian citizens are urged to adhere to WHO guidelines and comply with government-imposed lockdown measures. This includes maintaining social distancing, practicing personal hygiene, and consuming a nutritious diet to boost the immune system. The United States, with the highest number of cases, faces severe challenges, including a significant increase in unemployment rates due to the pandemic. This situation has been dubbed the 'Great Shutdown' and is considered the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression of 1929 (Wang, 2023).¹⁰ President Trump's administration voiced concerns about China and the World Health Organization, attributing blame for the global situation, particularly regarding the delay in declaring the coronavirus a pandemic" ("Trump Administration Submits Notice of U.S. Withdrawal From the World Health Organization Amid COVID-19 Pandemic," 2020).¹¹

⁸Nwodim, O. (2021, April 29). Government Policy Response to COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS*, 04(04). <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijmra/v4-i4-12>

⁹SS, I. (2021). Covid-19, Socio-Economic Impact and the Nigerian Government: An Overview. *Journal of Quality in Health Care & Economics*, 4(6). <https://doi.org/10.23880/jqhe-16000247>

¹⁰Wang, J. (2023, February 15). *Economic Policy Changes in the Great Depression of the United States and the Great Depression of COVID-19*. *BCP Social Sciences & Humanities*, 21, 418–422.

¹¹Trump Administration Submits Notice of U.S. Withdrawal from the World Health Organization Amid COVID-19 Pandemic. (2020, October). *American Journal of International Law*, 114(4), 765–772. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2020.76>

DEVELOPING A VACCINE AND A POSSIBLE CURE

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a wave of global challenges, with tensions, accusations, and counter-accusations between nations, governments, WHO, and their citizens. The race to develop a vaccine and find a potential cure has also become a contentious and criticized endeavor.

Over a hundred companies worldwide are engaged in vaccine development efforts, but the process is expected to take at least 18 months. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has committed substantial funds to take at least 18 months. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has committed substantial funds to support vaccine research and development. Amidst this, skepticism about taking a vaccine has become a prevailing sentiment across the globe. "The earliest vaccine anticipated to be ready by September is being developed by a United States-based company called 'Moderna.' However, this aggressive timeline has raised eyebrows among experts who question Moderna's unconventional approach. It involves bypassing animal testing and rapidly progressing to human testing, all in the pursuit of meeting the September deadline, a move that experts consider optimistically dangerous and unrealistic" (CNBC 2020).¹²

Despite these criticisms, Moderna has received considerable financial support, with over \$400 million pledged by the Trump administration for vaccine development. Meanwhile, numerous COVID-19 patients have tested negative after receiving a combination of drugs and vitamins. Yet, the world remains without a definitive cure, leaving many questions about what caused these recoveries. As African countries, like others, face the looming threat of COVID-19, the future seems uncertain. Vaccine development is an ongoing process, and the death toll continues to rise. It's a crucial moment for Africa to decide whether to wait for external solutions or take swift internal action by tapping into its natural resources and fostering the potential of local inventors, researchers, and scientists.

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN UNION IN FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC AND ITS REAFFIRMATION AND UNWAVERING SUPPORT TO W.H.O

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly become one of the most severe global health crises in recent history, causing significant disruptions to our daily lives, straining healthcare infrastructure, and severely impacting global economies. As the world confronts this common adversary, solidarity and unity of purpose are of utmost importance, fostering a shared future for humanity (Qian and Ren 2020)¹²

In this context, the Chairperson of the African Union, HE Cyril Ramaphosa, underscores his deep appreciation for the outstanding leadership of Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), during the early stages of this unprecedented global health emergency. The African Union acknowledges Dr. Tedros's exceptional management and leadership in the global response to the pandemic.

¹²Qian X, Ren, R., Wang, Y. et al. Fighting against the common enemy of COVID-19: a practice of building a community with a shared future of Mankind. *Dis Poverty* 9, 34 (2020)

The African Union recognizes the commendable efforts of the WHO, including mobilizing resources, sharing real-time information, and providing technical and material support to combat the spread of COVID-19. The WHO has been an indispensable technical and scientific partner for the African Union and the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) as they collectively strive to mitigate the pandemic's impact across member states.

The African Union has had previous experience working with Dr. Tedros and the WHO on global health crises, particularly during the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In recognition of these efforts, the African Union expresses unwavering support for the WHO and its Director-General. They call on the international community to join hands in supporting the WHO's efforts to combat the pandemic, emphasizing the need for global unity and cooperation in these challenging times.

Amidst the daunting tasks each country faces to contain the virus, it's essential to resist the temptation to assign blame, whether to individuals, institutions, or nations. This is a time for collective action, collaboration, and global solidarity. The most potent weapon against COVID-19 remains international cooperation and solidarity, as witnessed worldwide. The African Union appreciates the support provided by various partners, including the G20, China, the United States, the European Union, and the Jack Ma Foundation. They extend their gratitude to the dedicated medical personnel on the frontlines of this battle.

President Ramaphosa calls on all African Union members and international partners to maintain and strengthen international cooperation and collaboration in the difficult times ahead. Together, they aim to combat the pandemic with vigor and determination, ultimately returning the world to a sense of normalcy.

MADAGASCAR CURE CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

The Madagascar cure, known as COVID organics, represents a notable breakthrough that should be celebrated not only in Africa but globally. Despite its potential, this herbal medicine has faced significant criticism, particularly from the World Health Organization (WHO), international communities, and African health professionals, who question its efficacy, lack of scientific procedures, evaluation, and standardization. Critics have based their rejection of the Madagascar cure on its perceived lack of clinical trials and scientific evaluation (BBC News 2020).¹³ However, it is essential to consider that Madagascar reported zero COVID-19 deaths for an extended period before recently recording its first fatality. This encouraging data warrants a reconsideration of the remedy's effectiveness.

¹³¹²Qian X, Ren, R., Wang, Y. et al. Fighting against the common enemy of COVID-19: a practice of building a community with a shared future of Mankind. *Dis Poverty* 9, 34 (2020)

Despite the backlash, Madagascar's President has continued to champion this "Miracle cure" for its preventive and curative properties. Several African countries have ordered or purchased the Madagascar cure. To further evaluate its efficacy, the African Union (AU) should assemble a group of African scientists for additional testing and clinical trials. The involvement of European and Western powers in discrediting the Madagascar cure cannot be overlooked. It's evident that Western nations and their European counterparts have actively attempted to discredit this solution while the world waits for a vaccine or cure that might take an extended period to develop, putting global health at risk.

Nigeria received a shipment of COVID-19 organics, only for the president to later announce a preference for science over the Madagascar cure. This abrupt change highlights a political power play at work. It is crucial for the AU to demonstrate that it can safeguard Africa's interests, even in the face of international pressure. Reaffirming the AU's effectiveness is essential to dispel doubts about its capabilities.¹⁴

The African Union should focus on fostering peace and unity across African nations to establish a united front. This effort includes developing the collective and individual capacity to promote research in herbal medicine and drug development. Additionally, the AU should establish scientific procedures and evaluations to ensure local standardization. Ultimately, these actions will reduce Africa's dependence on international organizations like the WHO, which can be influenced by the politics of foreign powers. The African Union's collaboration with the Madagascar government to test the drug's safety and efficiency is a positive step in this direction.

In a time of global health crisis, it is imperative for the African Union to demonstrate its capacity to protect and advance Africa's interests, providing self-reliance and unity in the face of international challenges.

¹⁴CNBC Africa, (April 9, 2020). *African Union reaffirms support for WHO amid COVID-19 pandemic*

WHAT AFRICA SHOULD BE DOING TO FIGHT THE CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC

The emergence of the Madagascar cure, COVID organics, serves as a wake-up call for every African nation, the African Union (AU), and other stakeholders to reevaluate their approach to finding a cure for the coronavirus pandemic. It highlights the necessity of discarding political and economic influences that hinder the development of local solutions and looking inward to tap into Africa's rich resources of medicinal plants and roots (Abdullahi 2011).¹⁵ Africa has been a source of exploitation for its resources, including valuable medicinal plants, which are often exported to Europe without due benefit to the continent. This exploitation can no longer be tolerated. Historically, African forefathers successfully treated various diseases with local herbs and traditional methods before the advent of Western medicine or the World Health Organization (WHO).

Drawing a parallel with ancient Chinese medicine, which has remained effective for thousands of years, it's evident that indigenous medicine can play a significant role in addressing health challenges while adhering to local methods of trials and standardization. China provides a choice between Western and Chinese medicine, recognizing the importance of cultural medicine in sustainable growth and development, as the Asian tigers have done.

However, Africa has not sufficiently preserved its local methods and standards. It has relied heavily on foreign approaches and medicine, often looking to the West as the answer to its problems. Despite a rich history of using local herbs and traditional practices to cure various diseases, Africa has not adequately promoted these methods or invested in standardization. It is essential for African governments to collaborate with local scientists and traditional doctors, allocating funding and promoting research, creating systems to aid scientific processes, evaluation, and standardization of local herbs. Furthermore, governments should implement robust economic policies to regulate the importation of foreign medicine while promoting and supporting local herbal medicine.

This ambitious effort can only be achieved if African governments demonstrate the political will to make it a reality. Africa's ability to combat the coronavirus and look inward for possible cures hinges on embracing its rich heritage of medicinal plants and remedies. This approach would reduce Africa's reliance on international organizations like the WHO, which may be influenced by foreign politics.

¹⁵Abdullahi A, Tend and challenges of traditional medicine in Africa. *Africa Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2011; 8(5 suppl): 115-123.

Notably, African scholars, traditional medical practitioners, individuals, and even traditional rulers have shown hope in the potential for a cure originating from Africa. For example, the Ooni of Ife, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, has actively researched local herbs that could prove effective in treating COVID-19. The Ooni's initiative is at an advanced stage, and he believes the local cure will soon be made public.

The African Union, governments, and local leaders should take note of this awakening and invest in developing local solutions to address health challenges while putting an end to Africa's exploitation. (Author). In support of this perspective, the Ooni of Ife, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, stressed the importance of local herbal solutions and immune boosters, expressing optimism about finding a local cure for COVID-19 (Johnson 2020).¹⁶ He urged the Nigerian government to emulate countries like Madagascar, which have embraced traditional medicine. While international governments have shown interest in Africa's local solutions, Oba Ogunwusi stressed the need for local support and recognition.

His donation of motorized modular fumigators to the Ogun State government was part of his commitment to combating the pandemic. In response, Governor Dapo Abiodun thanked the Ooni for his gesture and assured the effective utilization of the fumigators to address the health crisis. He emphasized that the state government was open to innovative approaches in the fight against COVID-19 and encouraged the adoption of non-pharmaceutical interventions based on public health advisories (Author).

¹⁶Johnson V, (31 March, 2020) "Coronavirus: Ooni of Ife Prescribe "Potent Yoruba Herbs" as a cure. Guardian Newspapers.

3. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

The implications of this research are profound for Africa and its response to health challenges, particularly to future pandemics. The study underscores the urgent need for African nations to harness their rich heritage of medicinal plants and traditional remedies. By investing in local research, development, and standardization of indigenous medicine, Africa can become more self-reliant in addressing health crises. This approach not only offers potential solutions for COVID-19 but also positions the continent to confront future health challenges effectively. Furthermore, it reduces Africa's dependency on international organizations and foreign medicines. The commitment of traditional rulers, scholars, and local practitioners in exploring these remedies demonstrates the potential and determination within the continent to make a difference in global health.

In conclusion, Africa's fight against COVID-19 should be a catalyst for the revival and recognition of its traditional medicine and herbal remedies. With political will, collaboration, and investment, African nations can offer credible local solutions that have been effective for generations.

4. RECOMMENDATION

Government Funding for Research: African governments should allocate resources for research on herbal plants and medicines. Scholars can then develop a theoretical framework for quality control and standardization.

Promotion of Local Medicine: Policymakers should put in place regulations and policies that promote the use of local herbs and medicines. Simultaneously, they should regulate the importation of foreign drugs.

Workshops and Seminars: Governments should organize workshops and seminars, bringing together local scientists, trade medical practitioners, and experts to brainstorm and discuss how to promote and develop indigenous medicine.

Cultural Reorientation: Combatting cultural genocide and regaining confidence in local products, including medicine, should be a national campaign. Education programs should reintroduce history to understand past pandemics and foster appreciation for indigenous culture.

Early Warning Systems: Governments can explore traditional early warning systems like the IFA divination system used by the Yoruba ethnic group to predict future pandemics.

Research Frameworks: Funding research to create theoretical frameworks that encourage the sharing of ideas, formulas, methods, and innovations is essential.

Health System Improvement: Adequate funding for healthcare systems, including trained personnel, quality equipment, infrastructure, test kits, PPEs, ventilators, well-equipped isolation centers, and a responsive pandemic team, is crucial. Collaborating conventional treatments with alternative options is also advisable.

Emergency Funds: African nations should establish emergency funds to address future epidemics and pandemics.

Leadership: Solving the issue of bad leadership is vital. Visionary leaders with strong political will can drive policies and goals that are in the country's best interests.

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