

**WESTERN CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF AFRICAN
TRADITIONAL MEDICINE: A CASE STUDY OF AKAMBA HERBAL
MEDICINE**

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Abstract

Akamba traditional medicine, like the rest of African culture, has been grossly misinterpreted by the western missionaries. African traditional medicine and African culture are, of course, inter-related. The Western missionaries did not recognize African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a religion of equal status with Christianity. African herbal medicine, including that of the Akamba, was also condemned as evil. Thus ATR and herbal medicine were regarded as pertaining to the Devil. That is the crux of this research, using library consultation and field research. It was discovered that despite the demonization of the Akamba medicine by the Christian missionaries, it remains very popular and consumed by many people in Kenya.

Keywords: Herbal medicine, medicine- man, Akamba, African Traditional Religion, Western Christian Missionaries.

Introduction

Despite the drastic changes that have occurred in Africa, the practice of herbal medicine is still widespread among the Akamba. The Akamba are a Bantu speaking people of Eastern Kenya who occupy the counties of Machakos, Kitui, Makueni and other parts of Kenya. They are the fifth largest ethnic group in Kenya, and according to the 2009 census, they number about 3,893,157.¹ The majority of the Akamba are Christians and Muslims but still a significant number of them especially in the rural areas are followers African Traditional Religion (ATR). Many Akamba continue to uphold Christianity/Islam together with aspects of ATR.

Before the coming of Christianity and Islam, all the Akamba were practising ATR. The introduction of the new religions during the period of colonialism in Kenya drastically changed many institutions as understood by the Akamba. The first foreign religion to interact with the people was Islam. The Akamba, who were long-distance traders, interacted with the Arab traders in Voi and Mombasa. Due to the low number of the Akamba who were coming into contact with Islam, there was little impact.

On the other hand, the first Christian missionaries to come into contact with the Akamba were African Inland missionaries who arrived in Kalambya

Nzaui in Makueni in 1895.² They left an impact which is felt up to date. One of the institutions that were seriously affected by Christianity was the people's herbal medicine. The Akamba herbal medicine was practised by individuals who were medical specialists. The herbal medicine is connected with African culture, and the Akamba believed in a God who bestowed upon some people special talents. Herbal medicine was practised and understood as part of the Akamba traditional culture. E.B. Idowu observes as follows, "In Africa, by and large, the oral traditions have it that the basis of medicine is religion, in as much as it came directly from the supreme deity, and operated through tutelary divinity or spirits."³ Nevertheless some African scholars do not agree with Idowu's claims. Abioje argues, for instance, that magic and medicine were part of African scientific culture, rather than religion *per se*. He found in his research distinction between religion and medicine, with the explanation that non-religious persons could learn and make effective medicines, as in other parts of the world.⁴ Yet, as long as ATR was the sole religion in Ukambani, there was no conflict between religion and medicine; they are two sides of the same culture. The equation changed completely, however, when the missionaries started evangelising in Ukambani, as from the 19th century. In some instances, Christian missionaries introduced Western medicine along with Christianity, such as in places where they built hospitals. In such cases, African traditional medicine is sometimes perceived as evil.

Akamba Herbal Medicine in the Traditional Society

Just like among other Africans, the Akamba herbal medicine was associated with mystical powers, in so far as the herbs and their potentialities are considered to be divine endowments. Mbiti observes that "African peoples are aware of a mystical power in the universe; this power is ultimately from God."⁵ Medicine men and women could have access to that power. Among Africans, ill-health could have physical and metaphysical aspects. African medicine-men could be guided by the mystical powers to get herbs that could cure several diseases. In some cases, the medicine experts combine both physical and metaphysical healing. When it came to metaphysical healing, the medicine experts would utilize magical powers. It is interesting to note that Akamba medical experts, like in the rest of traditional Africa, deal with both the physical as well as psychological aspects of healing.

Medicine men and women occupied a special place in the healing process among the Akamba, as in the rest of Africa. In the traditional Akamba society, it was difficult to differentiate a herbalist from a magician. A magician Kikamba is *Mundu Mue* which literally means a wise person. An herbalist in Kikamba is *Mukimi wa Miti*, one who makes medicines from trees.⁶ To make medicines from trees requires one to have scientific knowledge. This knowledge was acquired through inheritance or apprenticeship. Hence for one to be effective in herbal medicine he /she had to have acquired the knowledge one way or another. Some are said to acquire it through some mystical experience. Among

the most effective herbalists in Akamba, as in Africa, generally, are also some magicians; men and women.

According to Gehman, the role of medicine men and women is the cosmological balance between good and evil.⁷ Among the Akamba, mystical powers were tapped for both good and evil. Devilish or black witches and wizards are said to tap mystical powers for evil purposes, such as causing ill-health, barrenness, poverty, madness, and suffering while medicine men tapped the same powers to solve health and social challenges.⁸

It was the work of the magician to counteract evil. Gehman writes that *Mundu mue* (medicine expert) is wise in that he or she knows and understands the use of local herbs for healing the sick, and in some instances could foretell the future, and seek out devilish witches (as opposed to white witches) and wizards.⁹ One became a medicine man or women by birth, through inheritance from a parent or through apprenticeship.¹⁰ It is important to note that some of the most renowned medicine experts among the Akamba are those who were born destined to become medicine experts. They were born with abnormal objects, such as *mbuu* (pebbles) and after attaining adulthood such individuals were formally initiated to begin their work.

As the medicine experts were growing, they might begin to dream of securing certain herbs that heal people.¹¹ They would be interested in different types of trees and roots for medicine.¹² In dealing with ill-health, medicine experts may see the need to do divination (*Kuausya*) with the divination pebbles (*mbuu*) placed in a divining gourd. Through this method they would get information on the causes of illness. If he or she discovers that the illness is due to physical causes, some herbs are given or prescribed to cure it. But if the illness was caused by some evil force, magical power is applied to deal with it.

Sometimes the cause of illness could be curses, effects of oaths, evil spirits, or bad luck. The medicine experts have the ability through tapping mystical powers to know the root-causes of the ill-health and prescribe a treatment procedure. As argued above, physical illnesses were cured by use of herbs. Other causes of illness could be counteracted by performing rituals (*kutonya ngondu*) while others would be healed by exorcising the evil forces.

In his book, J.S Mbiti mentions religious specialists along with African medicine- men.¹³ When the western missionaries and anthropologists looked at African medicine men they referred to them as “witchdoctors”. The word witchdoctor has acquired negative connotations. African medicine men and women are the very opposite of witches. In fact their main role was to counteract the negative effects of witches and other evil forces. Mbiti argues that every village in Africa has medicine experts within reach and they are usually friends of the community.¹⁴ The medicine expert is accessible to everybody and at all times.¹⁵ The role of a medicine- man among the Akamba is similar to that of a general practitioner in modern hospitals.

Mumo argues that medicine in Africa is conceived to have not only a physical meaning but also metaphysical and spiritual dimension.¹⁶When Africans

talk of well being it is a state of being in good relations with the physical as well as spiritual world. Therefore medicine in Africa is understood in a holistic manner.¹⁷ The role of medicine men and women in Africa was actually to deal with illness in all its manifestations. Idowu explains that in the preparation or administration of medicine, the name of God is mentioned and that medicine is applied with reference to God.¹⁸ Idowu quotes An Akan saying that “if God gave you sickness, he also gave you medicine”¹⁹ He further quotes a Yoruba supplicatory hymn;

Father of children (our father)!
Prepare medicine for children (us)
Children (we) have no medicine.²⁰

Of course, mentioning God expresses a person’s faith in God, rather than religion *per se*. In the collection of ingredients and dispensing, application of medicine may be accompanied by some forms of ritual, which Idowu notes it is to aid the person psychologically to get healed.²¹ The invocation of God in medicine provides the sick with psychological encouragement as well. Among the Akamba before the magician dispensed his or her medicine, some magical words may be said, or homage paid to some past experts through whom the medicine was revealed.²² In Kikamba this is called *kuthyuuu muti* meaning to transform the herbs to have curative powers.²³ One of the reasons why the missionaries condemned herbal medicine was because of the invocation of God’s and ancestral powers before the herbs were given. The Akamba believed that without invoking the name of God and ancestral spirits, a magic or medicine may not be effective.

Magesa argues that within African societies there were religious experts whose task is to discover the reasons for disharmony in the universe.²⁴ The experts are expected to know the causes of calamities and prescribe antidotes or cures for the problems.²⁵ They advised on measures to be taken to restore the force of life.²⁶ Magesa calls religious specialists in Africa herbalists or medicine-doctors.²⁷ Yet, being a religious specialist and being a medical expert are not necessarily synonymous. Herbalists have extensive medicinal knowledge of curative and protective herbs.²⁸ The herbalists make use of roots, leaves, parts of animal or birds. Magesa notes that all these elements such as plants, animals, water and fire represent the major forces of nature.²⁹ Magesa also shows the interconnectedness between herbal medicine and God. He writes: “African traditionalists categorise a range of forces as ‘medicine’ in addition to herbs and often physical curative materials”.³⁰

The role of medicine men and women is to know deeper realities of the whys and wherefores of suffering, illness, anger, discord, floods, drought, poverty, barrenness, impotence all kinds of loss and death.³¹ After knowing these realities, medicine experts give one power or another to eliminate or neutralize the evil force.³² Magesa concludes by saying medicine men enable Africans to

achieve the purpose of being human: long life, good relations with other people, with the ancestral and other spirits and with God.³³

The Christian Missionary Interpretation of Akamba Herbal Medicine

When the missionaries arrived in Ukambani, the Akamba understanding of herbs and medicine was profoundly disrupted. When the Africa Inland Mission (A.I.M) missionaries came into contact with the Akamba medicinal healing, they judged it as originating from evil forces. Gehman, comments that “The Bible teaches that behind genuinely extraordinary supernatural powers of African traditional religion is the work of demonic spirits.”³⁴ He further explains as follows, “God forbids any involvement whatsoever with mystical powers of any sort whether they are socially acceptable or not”³⁵ Mumo argues that this misinterpretation of Akamba healing is based on Christian concept of Satan which is non-existent in the African worldview.³⁶

According to many missionaries who worked in Ukambani, anyone consulting African religious specialists was seen as consulting agents of the Devil³⁷. This misinterpretation has demarcated African healing into physical healing which is acceptable and magical healing which is unacceptable.³⁸ This has made consulting African traditional healers especially those dealing with mystical powers a no go zone. In many parts of Ukambani, those Akamba who would want to consult for magical healing do it in total secrecy. The missionaries who were products of Western culture had negative and derogatory view of African culture. They equated Western culture with God, while African religion and culture were equated with Satan. The African worldview and religion were seen as being primitive.

Akamba herbal medicine was degraded and Western medicine elevated. Due to the negative view of ATR, the connection between herbal medicine and religion was condemned. The missionaries were of the view that Africans did not know God hence the God they were linking with healing was a false one. This prejudice against herbal medicine persists up to the present.³⁹ However, with time, there has been deliberate attempts to separate herbal medicine from African religion. In contemporary Kenyan society, there are some herbalists who practise herbal medicine without linking it to ATR. Many Christians make use of such herbalists. However, many evangelicals in Africa still view African medicine men negatively. Gehman observes that “mystical power ... magic, medicine men and witches are from the kingdom of darkness”.⁴⁰ This general condemnation of African medicine has made it difficult to promote it in all its aspects.

The Christian missionaries slowed down the growth of herbal and other medicines in Africa. They introduced a new education system which promoted Western culture. African children were slowly raised in Western culture. The elite that were produced by this form of Western education ended up disregarding African herbal medicine and embracing Western forms of medicine. Kigen, Rono, Kipkore and Rotich observe that “practice of herbal medicine in Kenya, unlike Asia has largely been considered primitive by the elite”⁴¹

It is very interesting to note that while the missionaries were uncomfortable with the linkage between healing and ATR, they went ahead and promoted psychological healing in Christianity. Lungwanya writes that “Africans were even more attracted to missionaries, medical services where some form of spiritual healing was involved”, and that some of the leading evangelists in Africa succeeded because of using spiritual healing in their ministries.⁴² Wherever these evangelists went they were followed by crowds who wanted to be spiritually healed⁴³

Akamba Herbal Medicine in Contemporary Kenyan Society

This researcher found that despite fierce opposition from Christian missionaries, herbal medicine in Ukambani and Kenya, generally, has continued to thrive and prosper. Traditional healers, herbalists and magicians still play crucial roles in providing health services in Kenya.⁴⁴ Many governments in Africa have not been able to avail medical services to all. Moreover, modern health services have proven to be unaffordable to a big percentage of African populations. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 80% of the peoples in the so-called developing countries continue to depend on traditional herbal medicine.⁴⁵

In Kenya, herbal medicine has been recognized by the government and WHO. The Kenyan government has established the traditional medicines and drugs research centre at Kenya Medical Research institute (KEMRI) in Nairobi.⁴⁶ Scientific research in Kenya has established cures or management through traditional herbal medicines of several health conditions such as epilepsy, diabetes, hypertension among others.⁴⁷ The University of Nairobi has set up an herbal medicine garden for scientific research into medicinal value of various plants and herbs.⁴⁸

Experts of herbal medicine are spread throughout Kenya. Literally in every village you will find some herbal experts. Herbal experts have been able to identify medicinal plants in their localities. Some herbalists have been able to collect, dry, grid, mix, package and store the beneficial herbs. Unlike in the traditional Kenyan society, herbal medicines are now well packed and labelled. Kenyan herbalists have been able to market their products in newspapers, FM Radio stations, television stations, market places, and in commercial buses. Herbal medicine in Kenya has become a lucrative business that is benefiting many people.

Herbal medicine in Kenya is beset by several challenges. The first challenge is the commercialization of the business. Many of those involved in herbal business is due to commercial gains. Some individuals who have no knowledge of herbal medicine have infiltrated it. There have been unproven claims of use of fake substances disguised as herbal medicine. Due to the commercialization and need for mass production it has been alleged that quality has been compromised. Kigen *et al* report about the “emergence of several quack traditional healers ...out to fleece and make quick bucks from desperate

patients.”⁴⁹ It has also not been easy to identify the genuine herbalists. Both in urban and rural areas, “herbalists” advertise claiming to cure all kinds of ailments.⁵⁰

Due to the increase in population and deforestation, some useful plants and herbs are being lost. It is important that those who are knowledgeable about herbal medicine get involved in its promotion and preservation. Some of the young people involved in herbal medicine have limited knowledge of the profession. There is need for the older and knowledgeable herbalists to be engaged in preserving the herbal trees in Africa. There should be collaboration between the old and the young in promoting herbal medicine.

Abuse of herbal medicine by money-minded individuals has led to the call by several researchers and scholars urging for strict regulation of herbal medicine in Africa. Kigen et al write that “The regulation of herbal medicine practice is still a major challenge in Africa.”⁵¹ The government of Kenya has set up a task force to draft laws to regulate herbal medicine but no tangible results have been realized.

There is need for increased research on herbal medicine. Though Kenya medical research institute has been engaging in herbal research, a lot more needs to be done. Above all, some kinds of understanding need to be reached between Christians and herbal medicine. Blanket condemnation of the magical aspects of African herbal medicine has not stopped its practice. Mumo observes that the extent and relevance of psychological/spiritual /religious healing should be studied and documented.⁵² Africans should be able to consult their traditional healers without shame. Today when Africans want to consult the traditional medical experts, they do it in secrecy. Outside of Africa, such as in India, Korea, and China, traditional healing has been promoted with tremendous success.⁵³ Africans should have freedom and unhindered access to physical, spiritual/psychological healing. To separate herbal medicine and magical healing is to do disservice to the African who encounters problems which can only be dealt with, magically.

Conclusion

Akamba herbal medicine, just like herbal medicine elsewhere in Africa, has acquired prominence in recent years. Despite the demonization of African medicine by Western missionaries and some Christians in Africa, many Africans and the World Health Organization recognize it as having great values, with particular reference to tropical diseases. In Africa, herbal medicine has always been connected with African traditional culture and environment. Medical experts in Africa are known to provide holistic healing. When the missionaries arrived in Africa they discredited the magical aspects of African healing, claiming that they are of demonic origin. The invocation of God in herbal medicine was necessary so as to deal not only with the physical aspects but also the spiritual aspects. Attempts to disregard the spiritual aspects of traditional herbal medicine have made it not to be as holistic as it used to be.

In contemporary Akamba society, there are all sorts of herbalists, both genuine and fake. There is need for a regulatory authority to be set up to guide the herbal practice. Medicinal plants in Africa need to be preserved, and new plantations established. Religions, especially Christianity, should allow the genuine medical experts to provide all aspects of herbal healing to their members.

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