

**READINGS**

**IN**

**MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY**

**EDITED BY**

**E. A. OKE  
&  
B. E. OWUMI**

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SOCIOLOGY**

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**E.A.OKE**

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**B.E. OWUMI**

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## Chapter Fourteen

### Traditional Practitioners (Healers & Healing Practices)

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#### INTRODUCTION

The term traditional practitioners brings to the fore the nature and concept of traditional medicine which gives basis for the existence of the professionals practicing the art. It is within this general framework that healers and healing process can be understood. Again, this context is fixed within a larger body which in fact informs the appellation tradition(al), way of doing things. It is essentially the variability of the cultures within society that leads to the variety of terminologies describing the practitioners (such as native doctor healer, traditional practitioner, medicine men, indigenous doctors, witch doctors to mention but a few) and various but differing specialists with different modus operandi which are dictated by the cultures and perception of the people (FMOH 1988).

It is against this background that this chapter attempts to examine the subject using the Okpe people of Delta State as a case study. We would also draw from existing stock of knowledge to enrich our experience of the ethnic group which constitutes our case.

First, let us conceptualize the term traditional medicine before examining the typologies of practitioners available. The range of items and structure which it applies have been described with differing terminologies by different authorities. Some refer to those as native medicine, indigenous, primitive, folk, black

medicine and in extreme cases Jujù. (Oke, 1995, Owumi 1989, Macleans 1971; Odebiyi 1976; Oyebola 1981). The reasons for these difference may be due to the various biases of writers and the ways practitioners of the art have professed their art and the variability of culture which invariably gives credence to the existence of the art. These differences in terminologies and practice across ethnic groups have tended to inhibit the growth/development of uniform national traditional health care structure. The national health policy and strategy to achieve health for all Nigeria (FMOH 1988) clearly stated that:

"Noting that traditional medicine is widely used, that there is no uniform system of traditional medicine in the country but that there are wide variations with each variant being strongly bound to the local culture and beliefs, The local health authorities shall, where applicable seek the collaboration of the traditional practitioners of promoting their health programmes..."

Irrespective of the above fact, it is clear that traditional medicine exists (Owumi 1994), with time, enough data would be generated about the practice from different cultures, on the basis of which a national structure would be put in place. What is, therefore, traditional medicine ?. The World health Organization (WHO) conceive of traditional medicine as the sum total of all knowledge and practices whether explicable or not used in the diagnosis, prevention and elimination of physical, mental imbalance and relying exclusively on practical experience and observation down from generation to generation whether verbally or writing. Germane as the above conception would appear, It is relevant to expatiate further the WHO conception by saying that traditional medicine is an art which is original or originates to/from the group where it obtains. A mechanism designed by the

people from their past experiences. (For instance, early men learnt to avoid poisonous food after eating them) to cope with the environment. In this sense, the practice of traditional medicine goes beyond just maintaining stable health to encompass protection from wild animals, evil spirits, motor accidents, successful harvest, haunting to a host of other human activities that impinges on survival of man in his environment (Sofowora 1984; Owumi 1989). It is against this background of the vast array which it caters for in addition to his indigenous ethos that traditional medicine has continued to appeal to the people inspite of the availability of western (scientific) medicine. It is within this general outlook that the subject is examined.

### **Belief Systems and Conception in Okpe-Land.**

The existence of traditional medicine in our society owes much to the values and perception of the members of the community. It is with this understanding that a belief examination of the belief system of the Okpe people is pertinent as a way of creating an adequate background for the comprehension of the subject under examination. The belief system of the Okpe people is quite embrasive. The belief varies from the ideas of the people about the Almighty God to other divinities and taboos which must be observed for the purpose of ensuring man's survival.

An average Okpe man is highly religious. He seldom does or engages in any activity without praying to the Almighty God for protection (Oтите 1973; Owumi 1989). He believe that God (Osolobrugwe) created him and thus should be worshipped. This God is supreme and believed to reside in the sky. There is usually no special place designated for the worship of the supreme God but in some cases a long pole with a folklike top used for holding plantain as food for God exist among the group (Oтите 1973, Nabofa 1982). This is usually found at the front of compound. Here prayers can be offered to God for the protection of members



of the family.

In a similar manner, the Okpe people venerate their departed ones. Both males and females are worshipped though with a higher premium being placed on the male ancestors. The worshipping of ancestors among the Okpe people is highly entrenched in the culture of the group. There are three basic level of ancestral worship. First is the central ancestral worship located at Oorerokpe the cradle of the Okpe people. Here, all the four sons of Okpe and their descendants worship at Edio annually. Secondly, they worship at the ward level and lastly the family (compound) level where each household would remember their departed ones. These departed loved ones are believed to be the custodian of the living and so when they are not properly attended to could cause misfortunes, in from of ill-health or poor harvest etc. Their spirit could cause or harm living members of the family. So central is this belief that marriages are presumed incompletely performed until the spirit of ancestors have been involved and offerings and prayers made to "them". (Nabofa 1982). The worshipping items consists of animals like goat, ram, pig, chicken, and some time fish including drinks which are consumed by members of the family. The remains (skull) of the animals are usually displayed at the entrance (door) inside the home. The officiating priest is usually the eldest male or female ancestral worship respectively.

The belief in witch craft is also very rife among the Okpes just as the case with the Ibibio people (Offiong 1983). They believe that a witch can harm his kinsmen or such harm can be done with the knowledge of a member of the family who is also a witch. It is believed that witches can cast spells on their victims spoiling their crops, causing ill health and killing people. Usually, when such spells are discovered early enough, it is believed that only the native doctor can intervene by atoning the witches and wizards (Owumi 1994).

This belief system in addition to others beliefs (Owumi 1989) largely explains the conception of disease among the group.

The Okpes generally believe that ill-health or misfortune could be induced by a number of factors or that it could be traced to many sources. First and foremost, they believe that ill-health or misfortune of any kind can be natural occurrence. In this sense ill-health could be attributed to poor diet, mosquito bite or some natural disasters like earthquakes or death due to famine or an ailment which is hereditary. Though, the Okpes believe in this, some problems that are natural in outlook originally may be defined differently when it persists. It is under this situation that ill-health is believed to be supernaturally or mystically induced. Some ailments are believed to have been induced by some supernatural forces in the environment. It is a common belief among the people that witches and wizards and sojourners can kill and cause some forms of misfortune for members of the community. Consequently when difficult problems are encountered such supernatural forces are referred to as the agent of such problem for example the witches are at it again. Why me ?. They want to kill me. In the same way as the Okpe man believes in the evil forces of supernatural beings so also does he believe that the ancestors can also inflict punishment on the members of the family when they are angry. The spirits of ancestors are believed to be around to protect living members who have accorded them their due respects and those who have not would be punished. This fact is account for ancestral worship among the group.

### **Traditional Practitioners and Practices**

Traditional medicine practitioners are persons who are endowed with the knowledge and skills to maintain the health needs of the members of the community. They basically rely on the local materials that are available within the community. That in a way suggests that every one who has the local skill to use the local material available for the maintenance of health living is a traditional healer (see Read 1966). That is a person who possesses

some knowledge that can facilitate the management of common/minor household problems. Beyond this group, there are a number of categories of traditional practitioners with specialized skills that transcends the everyday experience, In this light we could discuss the followings as the major practitioners among the Okpe people:-

- (1) The general practitioner
- (2) Oracle men/women
- (3) The Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA)
- (4) Psychiatrist
- (5) Bone setters
- (6) Massagers

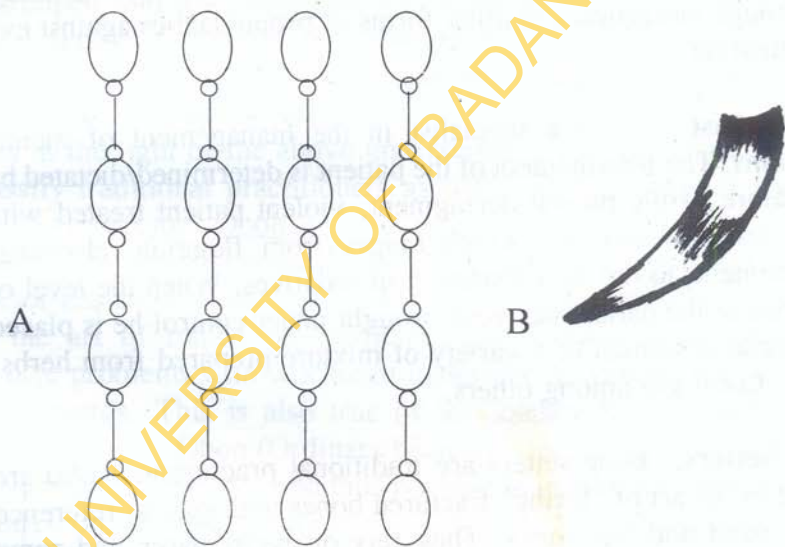
**The General Practitioners:-** They are persons versed in diverse skills in the management of different forms of problems in the community. That is they perform general services. This group of practitioners combine their knowledge of herbal medicine with their skills in divination. The function of the other categories mentions can be performed by this group of practitioners, It should be noted that inspite of this general skills in all aspect of management, there are special aliment where they are more proficient and so in times of serious problems specialist in those areas are consulted for assistance and special attention. (This point would become clearer when the subject of witch doctor is examined.)

They use a variety of materials which ranges from herbs, backs, animal parts such as the eye, skin of tiger, cat, snakes, cobral and local gin among others. These are made into mixture or powder or pomade which are administered to the patient. Every preparation is made according to the need of the patient regardless of the ailment because the spirit of the patient and the circumstances surrounding the ailment are crucial component in

health management in this realm.

Before the mixture is prepared, the general practitioner would have consulted the oracle for a possible prognosis and course of ill health management.

**Oracle men/women** :- The oracle are endowed with the special skills of divination. They basically divine the cause of the problem because it is believed among the Okpe people that ailment does not just come on their own and so something must be responsible for its occurrence, beyond this, it is when the cause of the problem is known beyond this, it is when the cause of the problem is known that an effective why of management can emerge. The main instrument of the oracle man in Okpe land is known as 'Evwa. This instrument consist of shells collected from a special tree known as "Agbrogodi". These shells are laced with a string, with each strand consisting of four shells. The total number of strands are normally four, making a total of sixteen shells in the whole paraphernalia. See the sketch below:



Another instrument used with the *evwa* is the tusk of a "bush pig" which the oracle-man uses in tapping the four stringed paraphernalia while making some un-intelligible statement which

are regarded as oracular language. The client also makes his inaudible complaint into this instrument. The oracle man holds the stringed instrument in pairs at a time and flings them on the floor. with the aid of the tusk, he taps the shells while speaking the special language during the course of divination. His findings are made known to the client during and at the close of the consultation and he advises accordingly.

**Traditional Birth Attendants:-** They are mostly women who have the skills in the management of maternity issues and delivery of babies. Their activities cover pre-natal and post-natal services. They have special skills in the management of women during and after birth and childhood diseases which they cure with the use of herbal medicine. Some of these services are administered orally, or through laceration and other forms of prophylactics against evil machination.

**Psychiatrist:-** He is a specialist in the management of mental problems. The management of the patient is determined/dictated by the nature of the mental derangement, violent patient treated with some level of violence which ranges from flogging, chaining, confinement, to the administration of sedatives. When the level of violence in the patient has been brought under control he is placed on special treatment of a variety of mixture prepared from herbs, barks, Local gin among others.

**Bone Setters:-** Bone setters are traditional practitioners who are versed in the art of "fixing" fractured bones with special reference to the hand and leg bones. They rely on herbs barks and some other material which they apply to the fractured part of the body in addition to their special skills in setting the fractured bones. The medicine is applied to the fractured part of the body while it is kept in place with the support of sticks woven around the fractured area. This protection is meant to keep the medicine in place and as

well guide the fractured bones and enhance easy recuperation. This approach depends on natural healing process which is a property of the body, some practitioners use some supernatural means as part of the healing process.

**Massagers:-** These are massagers who possess the special ability to rub the body, and dislocated bones. They also preform services to expectant mothers in order to facilitate easy delivery. They assist to put the foetus in its proper position in the womb.

The above discussion shown the basic category of traditional practitioners in Okpe land. This is not suggest that there is a distinct between the different classification except of course that it tends to highlight the major area of proficiency.

Finally, It must be stated that these taxonomy can be regrouped into tow, based on the values and belief system of the Okpe people. Generally, the Okpe people believe that ailment can be induced by various forces and so management should take cognisance of these sources.

It is in the light of the above understanding that the Okpe further classify traditional practitioners as witch doctors (edjele) and an "ordinary doctor" Oboh.

This classification is based on the belief that the witch doctor has some element of witch craft in addition to his prowess in the art of traditional medicine and is consequently able to resolve problems with witchcraft undertone by stoning the witches and wizards. This is also true of the Ibadan Yorubas (Maclean 1971) while the Obon (Ordinary healers) does not have the element of witchcraft substance and thus not able to handle problems which centres on the evil machination of witches. He only has a wide knowledge of herbal medicine which he uses to treat his clients (Owumi 1989; 1993; 1994).

## CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion reveals that the Okpe people have developed a variety of experts entrusted with the management of ill-health and other associated human problems of survival within the environment. These experts and their mode of practicing as discussed above is dictated by the culture and value systems which both practitioners and the/client share.

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