


## FOLK MEDICAL PRACTICES AND TREATMENTS IN AFRICAN FICTION

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**Type of manuscript:** research paper

**Abstract:** *This paper examines the enactment of cultural medical practices in the narratives of African writers. It aims at promoting the application of folk medicines in addressing the health problems of patients as enacted in artistic productions of fiction writers. It will celebrate, propagate and preserve these approaches to preventive and curative medical practices, which are indigenous to the African people. The study will be beneficial to health caregivers, researchers, health educators, health agencies and policy formulators, who are determined to promote the cultural healthcare system in society. It will reawaken and strengthen medical practitioners, patients and researchers, who may wish to apply folk medical practices as an alternative treatment for health problems in socio-cultural settings. This research is field survey and library-based, with the literary texts carefully and purposively selected according to their thematic thrust and qualitatively analysed. Oral interviews were conducted to gather first-hand information and data on traditional medical practices from respondents, who have profound knowledge of the topic. The respondents were elderly men and women with profound knowledge of traditional medical practices, and they were drawn from various Urhobo communities, such as Ughelli, Akperhe-Olomu, Orogun, Okparabe, Edjekota-Ogor, and Agbarha-Otor. Among those interviewed were traditional medical practitioners, diviners, and patients, who often apply traditional medicines as alternative and supplementary treatments. Apart from the primary materials, scholarly works that are relevant to the current study were also consulted by the researchers. Findings showed that African societies are endowed with diverse forms of folk medicine, including the use of herbs, hydrotherapy, heat therapy, use of ointments, hot food as an intervention, talk therapy, etc. The study concluded that African writers are conscious of the utilitarian functions of their indigenous healthcare interventions, and so they integrate some of the practices into their artistic works, not only for the documentation but also to activate the awareness of readers on the efficacy of the traditional medicines. The various folk medical practices can serve as alternative and complementary treatments for people who cannot afford western healthcare interventions in contemporary societies.*

**Keywords:** alternative, folk medicine, literature, sickness, wellbeing, patients.

**JEL Classification:** E60, I18, O57

**Received:** 10 November 2022

**Accepted:** 17 December 2022

**Published:** 31 December 2022

**Funding:** There is no funding for this research.

**Publisher:** Sumy State University

**Cite as:** Akporherhe, F., Udi, P. O., & Esemedafe, E. (2022). Folk Medical Practices and Treatments in African Fiction. *Health Economics and Management Review*, 4, 92-104.  
<https://doi.org/10.21272/hem.2022.4-10>



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**Introduction.** There is absolutely no society without methods of diagnosing ailments and administering treatments to patients. Such healthcare practices are peculiar to the people and they are often transferred to successive generations as a way of promoting and preserving them. In African societies, for instance, there are health practices such as heat therapy, hydrotherapy, massaging, cupping, phyto-therapy, talk therapy, etc. All these are carried out in various communities by indigenous health caregivers. While some treatments are administered at traditional health centres, others are done in the homes of ailing patients, especially where the condition is serious. Consultations, diagnosis and treatments and management of health challenges could be done by witch doctors, herbalists, oracles, and so on, depending on the nature of the sickness. Diverse illnesses or mental disorders, therefore, require appropriate methods of treatment. So, in African societies, patients with health problems are often encouraged to consult herbalists or native doctors for traditional diagnosis while trado-physicians administer all necessary treatments. There are cultural variants of healing practices in African societies, such as surgical operations, orthopedic, gynaecology, physiotherapy, psychiatry, counselling, exorcism, etc. These trado-medical interventions are practical-oriented, visual and can be learnt informally and transferred from one generation to another. Like the western healthcare system, African societies have peculiar methods of diagnosis, prevention, treatment and management of ill health. Some African writers have captured these folk medical practices and healing in their literary productions with a view to bringing their traditional healthcare system to the consciousness of the reader. They resonate in some dramatic works of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, Ola Rotimi, and Zulu Sofola; prose narratives of Camara Laye, Chinua Achebe, Helon Habila, Mariama Ba, and Elechi Amadi as well as some poetry of Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo and Kobena Acquah, to mention a few. Studies on traditional medical practices have been carried out by scholars previously. However, the aspect of enactment of trado-medical practices in African fictions has not received significant attention from literary scholars over the years. The study conducted by Abdullahi (2011) reveals that Traditional Medicine (TM) can be used interchangeably with «ethnomedicine», «folk medicine», «native healing», or «complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)». This medical practice is regarded as the oldest form of health care system that exists in various societies, including China, India and Africa. The investigation conducted by Heinrich et al. (2004) reveals the cultivation, development and application of herbal medicines by the Greeks. The research carried out by William George Black, which was acknowledged by Kusnitz (1992) revealed that folk medicine is intended to comprehend the subjects of charms, incantations, and those habits relating to the preservation of health, or the cure of disease, which were and are practiced by the more superstitious and old-fashioned. Gurib-Fakim and Mahomoodally (2006) found that African traditional medicines are suitable for illnesses or mental disorders that affect the human body and the psyche, while the healer typically diagnoses and treats the psychological basis of an illness before prescribing medicines to treat the symptoms. Another aspect of trado-medical practices that has been investigated is that of divination. The study by Abdullahi (2011) reveals that the traditional medical practice of diagnosis is common in African societies and attests to the fact that diviners and soothsayers investigate, mediate, counsel and appease to the gods and ancestors on behalf of Africans. The study conducted by White (2015) indicated that traditional healers in Kumasi, Ghana, have been practising traditional medical interventions before the advent of western healthcare system. Farnsworth et al. (1985) in their research found that more than 4000 million inhabitants of the world depend majorly on application of traditional medicines as primary healthcare interventions because of their confidence in the materials, which are extracted from plants and other natural resources. The foregoing studies will illuminate the current research since they attested to the application, promotion and preservation of traditional medicines in various societies. There have been numerous cases of health problems facing people in different societies. Although efforts are being made by the government, health providers, researchers, and healthcare agencies, to mention a few, to address the rising cases of ill health, the challenges appear to be on the increase as new ailments and diseases are discovered across the world. There are equally people who have profound knowledge of the application of herbs and other natural resources as methods of treatment. In Ngugi Wa Thiong O's *The River Between*, the medical value of plants is highlighted. Chege states the importance of botanical medicine, especially the bark and roots of trees, and their methods of application in restoring health of patients in cultural society. While the bark, leaves and roots of some trees or plants are medicinal and curative, the fruits could be poisonous when consumed. Chinua Achebe's (1984) presents the application of grasses, leaves, roots and barks of certain medicinal trees and shrubs for treatment of malaria fever in Igbo cultural society as could be practiced elsewhere. The procedures for the preparation of some herbal medicines are also presented for documentation in this literary work. The practice of hydrotherapy as an effective healthcare intervention is not left out in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Yet another health practice that is captured in novel is the heat therapy. Apart from herbal medicine, this cultural practice is common among the Igbo and in most African

communities. It is worthy of note that the indigenous knowledge and application of ointment camwood and heat therapies as effective forms of treatments are also documented in Achebe (1967). This is applied to restore the health of Priest Ezeulu in the narrative. Achebe, through this literary production, attests to the efficacy of these healthcare interventions. The use of heat therapy is meant to regulate the body temperature of patients when the need arises. It is predominantly practised in traditional settings, particularly in Igbo communities, as evident in this literary production. Findings further show that Africans diagnose with the traditional mechanism the causes and resultant effects of illnesses and psychological disorders in order to restore health and promote wellbeing in society. Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (2008) presents a traditional method of diagnosis to ascertain the causality of Jacqueline's depressive condition. Also, Farmata, the groit woman of the cowries reveals Aissatou's three months' pregnancy, using her cowries. This treatment method is infused into artistic works and they could take various forms. In Achebe's (1967), there is the practice of wood carving is portrayed as a method of treatment in traditional Igbo society. These artistic works include ikenga, okposi and ofo, which belong to individuals. The rural dwellers strongly believe that carved wood such as faceless okposi, for instance, could help in healing patients suffering from convulsions. This study further revealed that Africans believe in the power of gods, spirits and ancestors, so they offer prayers and pour libations to them when the need arises. Creative works are dotted with illustrations of this belief. Evidence has shown that even the prayers of goodwill for others can be therapeutic to the person offering such prayers. In Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Papa-Nnukwu's prayers for others, particularly for his wealthy son, Eugene, who has neglected him, exemplifies the therapeutic value of goodwill and prayers for others and the well-wisher. In Achebe's (1984), the people of Umuofia believe strongly in the healing powers of their personal gods and their ancestral spirits through the offering of sacrifices and prayers to them. These are archetypal rituals, and so Okonkwo built a «the medicine house», where he offers sacrifices to his god and his ancestral spirit, using kola nut, food and palm wine. He offers prayers on behalf of himself and family. In African societies, sacrifices are often offered to ancestors and the gods for peace, good health and prosperity, among others. There is the cultural belief that the sick and other believers usually receive healings and blessings once their supplications and sacrifices are accepted by the gods or ancestors. Africans also apply food as method of treatment in traditional societies as portrayed in Chinua Achebe's (1967). The consumption of favourite food helped Priest Ezeulu to recover from his ill health and this implies that certain cultural food contains nutritional values, which are recommended to patients to enable them recover speedily. In the novel, Ezeulu's body temperature becomes abnormal when he returns from detention and so in order to increase such temperature, he was served hot utazi food, which he drank before regaining some strength. Nature therapeutic intervention is also captured in African narratives. In Chimamanda Adichie (2006), the liberating and psychologically rejuvenating impact of nature is enacted in the ambience of a quiet garden. The narrator and protagonist, Kambili evokes the choking, suffocating, and yet silent and tense atmosphere created by her father for her mother, brother Jaja, and herself. The psychological freedom that eventually greets the characters depicts the metaphor of nature. Adichie captures Auntie Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka and the experimental purple hibiscus with its fragrant in her narrative. This implies that the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, like people in other societies, are conversant with the therapeutic effects of nature on human health. The nostalgic reflection of the heroine on the sight of natural garden with colourful flowers is meant to trigger pleasant memories that will enhance her mood and healthy condition. Since Africans practise various forms of traditional medicines, which are affordable, available and effective for treatments of health challenges, it is recommended that the practice of traditional medicines should be promoted by individuals, corporate bodies and governments to complement the orthodox healthcare system; modern equipment and facilities that may help in massive production of traditional medicines should be provided by government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through healthcare agencies; literary writers should continue to showcase various forms of African indigenous medical practices and their methods of application; researchers, health institutions, corporate bodies, and communities should work collectively to advance the practice of folk medicines, which researchers have discovered to be effective for treatment of health problems before the emergence of biomedical therapies.

This study explores the enactment of traditional medical practices in some artistic works of selected African writers. Over the years, there have been agitation for alternative or complementary medicines for patients who are suffering from one health problem or other. Though orthodox healthcare system has been playing significant roles in African societies, health challenges continue to increase at alarming rate. Based on the foregoing, this paper examines the application of folk medicines as portrayed in the chosen fictional works. Specifically, the study will explore; the concept of folk medicine, trado-medical practices and health problems in societies, modes of training and practices of folk medicines, and the enactment of traditional

medicines in fiction. The study will be of great significance to patients, researchers, health caregivers, health educators, healthcare agencies, health institutions, and policy formulators who are determined to promote cultural healthcare system in society. The findings of the research will reawaken and strengthen medical practitioners, patients and researchers, who may wish to apply folk medical practices as alternative treatment for health problems in socio-cultural settings

Counter-discursive writings by African writers affirmed that before the arrival of the coloniser, African societies had their culture. By paying critical attention to anthropological details, they demonstrated that their societies were not mindless and primitive as mainstream European literature and media about Africa attempted to show. Some of these works, in spite of their other thematic preoccupations, have further projected African culture by highlighting folk medical practices before the introduction of western medicine. Even with the emergence of modern medical practices on the continent, many Africans continue to patronise folk medical practices either as supplementary or alternative. Folk medicine is a vital aspect of folklore that requires adequate scholarly attention because of its immeasurable cultural value in society. With its origin traceable to primordial era, folk medicine has been transferred from one generation to another through informal trainings and practices, especially in traditional settings.

The desire of African writers to preserve this indigenous knowledge of folk medicine informed the inclusion of these various forms of this rich cultural healthcare system in their literary works over the years. They have shown that before the emergence of Western healthcare system, Africans have been administering treatments to patients in their special traditional ways and people have confidence in the service deliveries rendered by traditional physicians and other healthcare providers in various communities. Some of the famous writers present their cultural diagnostic methods, pointing out their significance among patients and society at large while others document types of treatment and management of ailments, afflictions and psychological illnesses with a view to making their traditional societies healthy and worthy of living. A couple of African scholars have in various genres of literature presented one healthcare issue or the other for the growth and development of their immediate communities, ethnic nationalities and Africa in general.

**Literature Review.** The practice of medicine is not restricted to a particular culture, even though studies have shown that modern medical practices began in Western and European societies. In traditional settings, this is referred to as folk medicine. Kusnitz acknowledged William George Black who sees folk medicine as intended to «comprehend the subjects of charms, incantations, and those habits relating to the preservation of health, or the cure of disease, which were and are practiced by the more superstitious and old-fashioned» (cited in Kusnitz, 1992). In spite of his patronizing and derogatory view of folk medicine, his definition highlights the curative and preservative purposes of folk medicine and the fact that the practice has its origin in antiquity. Research carried out by Abdullahi has shown that Traditional Medicine (TM) can be used synonymously with «ethnomedicine», «folk medicine», «native healing», or «complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)». This medical practice is regarded as «the oldest form of health care system that has stood the test of time. It is an ancient and culture-bound method of healing that humans have used to cope and deal with various diseases that have threatened their existence and survival» (Abdullahi, 2011). The scholar further observed that in various societies including China, India and Africa, there are «different forms of indigenous healing methods that are captured under the broad concept of TM». The foregoing findings, therefore, show that folk medicine is as old as human existence, and it is practised among Africans (and many other people across the world) as an aspect of their culture. It is different from modern (orthodox) medicine and its information and knowledge acquired over the years is transferred from one generation to another. In corroborating the foregoing, Mahomoodally asserts that the «African traditional healthcare system is perhaps the oldest and the most assorted of all therapeutic systems. In many parts of rural Africa, traditional healers prescribing medicinal plants are the most easily accessible and affordable health resource available to the local community and at times the only therapy that subsists» (Mahomoodally, 2013).

Investigation reveals that the Greeks are famous for the cultivation, development and application of herbal medicines. All these have been recorded by Dioscorides as he travelled with «the Roman armies» and by implication, the Western world promotes traditional medicines through utilisation and documentation in published books (Heinrich et al., 2004). Orthodox medical practitioners utilise modern bio-medical facilities such as scanners, X-ray machines, ultrasound, and so on, to diagnose and treat patients with diverse sicknesses or diseases. But in traditional medicine, folk physicians explain diseases through magical tools and supernatural powers. The application of folk medicine and treatment is done in patients' homes and healing places, which could be described as «folk hospitals». Traditional physicians use medicinal plants and herbs in place of pharmaceutical drugs in their healing centres.

African traditional medicines address health problems that are related to «both the body and the mind. The healer typically diagnoses and treats the psychological basis of an illness before prescribing medicines to treat the symptoms» (Gurib-Fakim and Mahomoodally, 2006). Apart from herbs, magical animals are also used in traditional medical practices. For instance, traditional healers use animal parts and by-products to treat certain sicknesses or afflictions. They believe that animals like snakes, toads, earthworms, millipedes, birds, catfish and eels (electric fish), to mention a few, have healing properties, and so folk medical practitioners utilise various methods for treatments of diseases or illnesses. They employ prayers, massaging, dancing, cold water therapy, heat therapy, hot and cold foods, medicinal plants and herbs, cupping (drawing of blood to skin surface), cutting, and so on as methods of healing. Some of the trado-medical practitioners are herbalists, native healers, soothsayers, and so on. All these are incorporated into literary works for preservation and application. Like the healing practices discussed above, this form of folklore is a demonstrative and non-verbal mode of communicating indigenous knowledge of medicines to other generations in society.

Another aspect of this study that is worthy of note is «divination», which is the traditional medical practice of diagnosis that is common in African societies. Studies have shown that Africans communicate with their ancestors, gods, deities, and other spiritual beings through divinations. Diviners and soothsayers are thus saddled with the responsibilities of investigating, mediating, counselling and appeasing the gods and ancestors on behalf of African people. Findings have shown that «traditional healers» perform dual functions in various traditional societies, and these are as «an intermediary between the visible and invisible worlds; between the living and the dead or ancestors, sometimes to determine which spirits are at work and how to bring the sick person back into harmony with the ancestors» (Abdullahi, 2011). The passion for traditional medicines as major means of treatment for both physical and psychological problems was unquantifiable before colonialism. All cultural treatments carried out by the diviners, herbalists and soothsayers mentioned above are transmitted through the indigenous language of the people.

The research of White indicates that “some of the traditional healers in Kumasi, Ghana, affirmed that they do sometimes interview their patients in order to find out the history behind the sickness, where they have been for treatment, and how long the person has been in that situation” (White, 2015). This technique is also applied in orthodox medical services to enable physicians to administer appropriate treatments to patients under their care. The findings of the scholar further revealed that family members have the right to speak on behalf of their sick patients who are probably in a critical condition.

Apart from the trado-medical practitioners who administer treatments to patients in societies, individuals with knowledge of herbal medicines and clinical interventions carry out voluntary health services within their family units and also render free voluntary help to neighbours with a view to promoting health and psychological wellness in society. Such indigenous knowledge and skills demonstrated at this level may be acquired and stored in the memory from childhood till maturity, and applied and transferred to others for the betterment of humanity. The efficacy of the folk treatments applied in the past encourage patients to continue seeking the services of trado-medical physicians. In corroborating the above, Farnsworth, et al. assert that «more than 4000 million inhabitants of the world rely chiefly on traditional medicines for their primary health care needs, and it can safely be presumed that a major part of traditional therapy involves the use of plant extracts or their active principles» (Farnsworth et al., 1985).

Studies have further shown that Africans believe in the healing powers of supernatural beings, which include the ancestors, gods and goddesses, guidance spirits, and family spirit. Apart from the fact that they acknowledge the potency of the foregoing entities, the people depend on the intuitive knowledge and skills of trado-medical practitioners which writers present in their creative works as a way of promoting African cultural values in respect of folk medicines and healing practices. In this paper, our focus shall be on folk medicines and healing practices reenacted in the artistic writings of some Africans with a view to promoting and preserving these traditional healthcare interventions in society.

**Methodology and research methods.** This study is a descriptive survey research that focuses on folk medicines as presented in fictional works of some African writers. The primary texts were purposively selected based on their relevance to the study and its specific objectives. Some interviews were also conducted to add firsthand information to the work. The respondents include adult men and women with profound knowledge of folk medicines and their applications in socio-cultural settings. They were drawn from various Urhobo communities, such as Ughelli, Akperhe-Olomu, Orogun, Okparabe, Edjekota-Ogor, and Agbarha-Otor. These represent six of the twenty-four kingdoms that constitute the Urhobo ethnic nationality in Delta State, Nigeria. They were purposively selected for this research. Among those interviewed were traditional medical practitioners, diviners, and patients who often apply trado-medicines as alternative and supplementary treatments. The research information gathered from both the field and the primary texts were carefully studied

and analysed using the qualitative method since numbers are not involved. Scholarly materials that are related to the study were however consulted and employed to support the discourse.

**Results.** This research explores the interface between healthcare practices and literature, specifically the genre of prose fiction in traditional African societies. Although western healthcare system is available for the people, the cultural forms of medical practice still receive significant attention. So, African writers see the need to infuse them into their writings in order to preserve and celebrate their values. The findings of this study, therefore, are logically presented in sub-headings.

**Trado-Medical Practices and Health Problems.** There are traditional variants of healing practices in African societies and these include surgical operations, orthopedic, gynaecology, physiotherapy, psychiatry, counselling and exorcism, to mention a few. Apart from the above-mentioned forms of healing practices, folk treatments also abound for various diseases or afflictions and patients are often encouraged to visit herbalists or native doctors at their shrines for traditional diagnosis. There are treatments for sicknesses or ill health conditions, such as high temperatures, malaria fever, asthma, toothaches, stomachaches, sore feet, bladder and kidney infections, headaches, bleeding, rheumatism, arthritis, gonorrhoea, bedwetting, malaria, cuts and boils, stroke and dog bites. There are also traditional treatments for eczema, infertility, coughs, jaundice, sexual dysfunction, low sperm counts, and tuberculosis, to mention a few. This aspect of African folklore is practical and visual. It is expressed through demonstration; hence, it can be learnt in an informal way and transferred to successive generations.

The foregoing explication shows that African societies actually have peculiar methods of diagnosis, prevention, treatment and management of health challenges, and so there is the utmost need to infuse these cultural practices into their literary productions to promote a healthy society. Various African writers have captured folk medical practices and healings in their literary works in order to bring their traditional healthcare system to the limelight. In view of the foregoing, a few selected novels that present forms of traditional medical diagnosis and treatments for physical and psychological ailments in socio-cultural settings would be explored.

**Modes of Training and Practices.** The knowledge of folk medicine, as stated earlier, is not transmitted formally but it is done informally and in various ways, which would be revealed in the course of our discourse. The human mind, particularly those of creative writers, is a reservoir of experiences recollected throughout the lifespan of every individual in society. Some of the memories, which have been repressed to the unconscious layer of the mind are activated and transmitted to successive generations in compressed form, fragmented but rational patterns.

Folk medicine as a healthcare practice is predominant in most cultures in the world. The indigenous knowledge of medicine is deposited in the psyche of individuals, who have had personal experiences of any form of healthcare intervention and have acquired these skills and knowledge through interpersonal interactions with practitioners or revelations in the form of dreams and trance. Africans, like their counterparts elsewhere, have the knowledge of traditional medical practices, which they demonstrate through various clinical methods in order to promote health and psychological wellbeing of individuals and families in socio-cultural settings. In some communities, certain people engage in healing practices with herbs, guidance and counselling, talking therapy and other healthcare services. These may be inherited from forefathers or learnt informally in a cultural setting. People have profound knowledge of traditional treatments, which they inherited from past generations. Though people have conscious awareness of this method of intervention, the practice and documentation appear to be scanty. According to Gurib-Fakim «African traditional medicine is the oldest and perhaps the most diverse of all medicine systems. Africa is considered to be the cradle of Mankind with a rich biological and cultural diversity marked regional difference in healing practices» (Gurib-Fakim, 2006). Though the indigenous healthcare system has been in existence from time immemorial, research has shown that «the systems of medicines are poorly recorded and remain so to date. Yet the documentation of medicinal uses of African plants is becoming increasingly urgent because of the rapid loss of the natural habitats of some of these plants because of anthropogenic activities».

Field investigation has revealed that people who have interest in healthcare practice attach themselves to trado-healthcare practitioners where they learn the skills, rules and regulations pertaining to this medical practice. For instance, findings reveal that it is unethical for male traditional physicians to watch female patients who are stark naked undergoing water cleansing ritual, bathing with prepared herbal medicines. They should not also expose patients publicly, murder their offenders with diabolical powers, or indulge in other heinous acts. The reverse is the case when the trado-physician is a female. Such practitioners must not have sexual intercourse with their patients, make sex during the daytime nor prepare medicines for clients to terminate the lives of other people. Trainees could travel from far and neighbouring villages to verbally apply

for traditional medical practices in society. They usually specialise in similar areas of the medical experts or professionals, who transfer their indigenous knowledge and skills to apprentices with codes of conduct given to them.

Interestingly, some trado-medical practitioners from our findings never undergo trainings like others. Their knowledge and skills in healthcare were inherited from their forefather or mothers who were famous in the practice of traditional medicines. A couple of trado-medical physicians and herbalists, who were interviewed in the field on separate occasions, revealed that they are naturally gifted. According to the trado-medical experts, they become more experienced and knowledgeable as they render healthcare services to patients with various kinds of ailments. The research findings further reveal that trado-medical healers get solutions to health challenges brought to them through messages they receive in form of trances or visions, dreams, spiritual reports, and so on, before the arrival of patients. They interview patients or their family members sometimes to establish a contact with them spiritually and also to diagnose the causes of the physical or psychological problems of the sick.

**Trado-Medical Practices in Artistic Writings.** The central themes of the artistic works of African writers in folk medical issues include infertility, food poison, malaria fever, snake bites, sickle cell anaemia, depressive symptomology, psychiatric episode, afflictions, and so on. In drama, the literary works that reflect the above subjects include John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *The Wives' Revolt*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, and so on, while prose fictions are Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Chinua Achebe's (1967; 1964), *Madman*, Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, to mention a few. In poetry, the subject of folk medicine and healing practices also resonate specifically in Wole Soyinka's and J. P. Clark's «Abiku», «Kobena Acquah's «In the Navel of the Soul» and so on. This study, however, will focus on selected African novels that draw on the subject of folk medical practices and healings in society as presented in the artistic works of some African writers.

Diverse aspects of traditional medical practices are infused into artistic writings of some African writers, especially those with profound knowledge of healthcare system in their communities. In this study, the researchers examine works of selected African writers that capture folk medicines and healing practices in society. Our findings shall be presented in sub-headings.

**Trado-Practice of Herbal and Hydro-Therapy.** A certain number of Africans also have profound knowledge of the application of herbs and other natural resources as methods of treatment. In Ngugi Wa Thiong O's *The River Between* (1965), the medical value of plants is highlighted. The narrative shows the journey of Chege and his son, Waiyaki along Honia River. Both of them walked on in silence but «when Chege stopped near a certain tree or bush, Waiyaki knew that his father had something to explain to him». Chege knows the importance of botanical medicine, especially the bark and roots of trees, and their methods of application in restoring health of patients in socio-cultural settings. According to the narrator, Chege explains to his son, thus: «The bark of that tree is good for a fresh wound». «The roots of this plant are good. When your stomach bites you, you boil them in water. Drink the liquid». «And sometimes it would be a warning against that tree», «whose fruit is full of poison» (Ngugi, 1965). Those who are familiar with herbal treatments would agree to the fact that while the bark, leaves and roots of some trees or plants are medicinal and curative, the fruits could be poisonous when consumed as clearly revealed above. In corroborating the foregoing, Gurib-Fakim and Mahomoodally acknowledged Heinrich et al. who stated that, «plants have formed the basis of sophisticated traditional medicine systems that have existed over millennia. Herbal medical products form part of systems of knowledge and practice that has been transmitted over centuries and is evolving fast» (Heinrich et al., 2004; Gurib-Fakim and Mahomoodally, 2013). The scholars observed also that people, such as «the Chinese, Ayurvedic, Kampo, Arabic, European Unani, Jamu, etc.», depend on folk medicines «directly or indirectly either as alternatives to mainstream medication or as isolated molecules that are derived from medicinal plants» (Heinrich et al., 2004).

In affirming the forgoing, Chinua Achebe presents the health problem of a female character in *Things Fall Apart*, who suffers from malaria fever and the reactions of her parents to restore her health condition, using herbal treatments. According to the narrator, when Okonkwo heard of Ezinma's sickness, «he took his matchet and went into the bush to collect the leaves and grasses and barks of trees that went into making the medicine for iba» (Achebe, 1984). The narrator further reveals that «Okonkwo returned from the bush carrying on his left shoulder a large bundle of grasses and leaves, roots and barks of medicinal trees and shrubs» (Achebe, 1984). Through the omniscient narrative technique, readers become abreast of the procedures for the preparation of some herbal medicines, thus: «Ekwefi went to bring the pot and Okonkwo selected the best from the bundle, in their due proportions, and cut them up. He put them in the pot and Ekwefi poured in some

water...she set the pot on the fire and Okonkwo took up his matchet to return to his obi» (Achebe, 1984). Though this novel was written several decades ago, the information it conveys about folk medical practices is still common in many African traditional societies.

The above information will greatly enhance readers, pharmacologists and health researchers on the need to apply folk medicines as either supplementary or alternative treatments. These practices have been in existence for long and so they should be preserved and promoted in societies, especially where there is no modern healthcare system. Closely related to the use of herbal medicines is hydro-therapy, which is another method of treatment practised by Africans in traditional settings. This is evident in *Umuofia*, which represents the Igbo society, Achebe reports that «Okonkwo returned when he felt the medicine had cooked long enough. He looked it over and said it was done. He took down the pot from the fire and placed it on the stool, astride the steaming pot. The thick mat was thrown over both» (Achebe, 1984). Patients are expected to feel the «overpowering steam» of the boiling medicines and as the narrator rightly recounts, at the end of the therapy session, Ezinma «was drenched in perspiration. Ekwefi mopped her with a piece of cloth and she lay down on a dry mat and was soon asleep» (Achebe, 1984).

Findings have revealed that the application of hydrotherapy is an effective healthcare practice, that is predominant in some African communities where the people believe in the efficacy of phyto-resources in the treatment of ill patients. As Achebe reveals outright in this text, every patient suffering from malaria fever must undergo the heating process until he or she is «drenched in perspiration». In most cases, the patients receiving hydrotherapeutic intervention have to be covered with their eyes, mouth and nose widely opened while also inhaling and exhaling the steam that emanates from the hot pot placed on fire. This cultural treatment is still being practised in some communities where the people strongly acknowledge the effectiveness of the intervention.

**Practice of Ointments and Heat Therapy.** Yet another health practice that is captured in novel is the heat therapy. Apart from herbal medicine, this cultural practice is common among the Igbo and in most African communities. This is also evident in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as reported by the authorial voice thus: «Ezinma had not been ill since. And then suddenly she had begun to shiver in the night. Ekwefi brought her to the fireplace, spread her mat on the floor and built a fire» (Achebe, 1984). This form of cultural treatment is common among elders whose major occupations include farming, fishing, palm wine tapping, palm tree harvesting, etc. Often times, such people, some of whom might be drenched by rainfall, make themselves comfortable by sitting beside the fire while eating and probably telling stories to their children and neighbours. However, where a patient is suffering from serious health problem stories need not be told because the attention of every member of the immediate family is on speedy recovery of the sick. While affirming the relevance of the folk medicine to people in socio-cultural settings, Abdullahi acknowledged Romero-Daza, who observes that before the introduction of «cosmopolitan medicine», traditional medicines were predominantly «available to millions of people in Africa in both rural and urban communities. Indeed, it was the only source of medical care for a greater proportion of the population» (Romero-Daza, 2002; Abdullahi, 2011). The application of the traditional medicine should be encouraged in society, as it was during the colonial Nigeria. The practice is effective and is glued to the environment of the people who require such medical attention.

It is worthy of note that the indigenous knowledge and application of ointment and heat as forms of treatments are also documented in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. For instance, the omniscient narrator reports that Ezeulu «had pains in his feet and thighs and his spittle had a bitter taste. But he had forestalled the worst effects of his exertion by having his body rubbed with a light ointment of camwood as soon as he returned home and by ensuring that a log fire burned beside his low bamboo bed all night» (Achebe, 1967). Achebe through this literary production attests to the efficacy of ointment and heat therapies, declaring with confidence that, «there was no medicine equal to camwood and fire. Very soon the priest would rise as sound as newly fired clay».

Again in the novel, the writer recounts the unhealthy condition of Ezeulu when he returned from detention in Okperi. In his numbness and shivering condition, Ezeulu's family «made a big fire for him», «quickly prepared camwood ointment» and rub his chest and back with the «the camwood paste» (Achebe, 1967). Healing practices in traditional society are of various kinds and the methods of application of medicines equally vary. In the text, the writer presents the use of heat therapy and that of ointment application to the body of Ezeulu, who probably has the signs and symptoms of malaria. The ointment applied on the body of the Chief Priest is produced from camwood. According to Konkon, et al., «camwood is a red dye-wood imported from tropical West Africa». It is derived from a leguminous tree, which has «very fine colour, and is used in turnery for making knife handles and other similar articles» (Konkon et al., 2011). The use of



camwood paste is common in traditional Igbo communities as could be found elsewhere; hence, Chinua Achebe captures it in his novel. While emphasizing the significance of camwood as treatment in traditional society, Omowumi, et alio (2018) stated that, «leaves and bark from this plant are considered hemostatic and anti-inflammatory and are used for curing sores and wounds, while the dye from the bark is formed into red body cosmetics. Honey-hunters rub their body with the dye to prevent bee-stings» (Omowumi et al., 2018).

Achebe's decision to capture the application of parts of trees such as the camwood for treatment of patients has demonstrated his profound knowledge and value for traditional medicines. Apart from the above uses of the dye extracted from the bark of a particular tree, «it is also made into ointments, which are applied against stiff and swollen joints, sprains and rheumatism. The plant materials are increasingly being used as a major ingredient in the production of local cosmetics and skincare products» (Omowumi et al, 2018). The people of Okperi, particularly the family of Chief Ezeulu, acknowledge the therapeutic efficacy of the ointments in treatment of individuals by applying it to the body. Though this method of treatment is not peculiar to only the Igbo of Nigeria, other ethnic groups may also have one kind of ointment or the other made from certain species of trees. The use of heat therapy, which is also captured in the text is predominantly practised in traditional settings, particularly in Igbo communities as evident in this literary production. This is a method of regulating the body temperature of patients who experience ill health in society.

**Trado-Consultations and Diagnosis.** In modern society, the causality of the death of people is investigated through autopsy or postmortem, but in traditional African settings, the oracles are often consulted to unravel the mystery surrendering the demise of individuals within a family or community. It is reported in the narrative that the oracles are consulted in respect of Ekwefi's dead children. According to the novelist, «Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three» (Achebe, 1984). This is a devastating experience, but in order to stop the recurrence, Okonkwo had to consult «a medicine-man who was also a diviner of the Afa oracle, to inquire what was amiss». The result given to Okonkwo in the narrative was reported to be shocking as the child was said to be «an ogbanje, one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mothers' wombs to be born again».

Apart from the unravelling of causalities of death in society, Africans also carry out trado-consultations to diagnose the causes and resultant effects of both physical and psychological ailments in order to restore health and promote wellness in society. For instance, in Ba (2008), when Jacqueline's depressive condition deteriorates in spite of the treatments preliminarily administered to her by her physician, the people resorted to folk medicine and traditional diagnosis. According to the narrator, «We tried everything to draw this sister out of her private hell. And it was your mother, Aissatou, who went to consult the native medicine men for us and brought back safara from her visits and directions for the sacrifices you quickly carried out» (Ba, 2008). In traditional African settings, the groits can spiritually diagnose a lady to ascertain her fertility condition or pregnancy. This is evident in the novel where Farmata, the groit woman of the cowries informed Ramatoulaye about her daughter's (Aissatou) three months' pregnancy. Signs and symptoms of early pregnancy are noticed by the groit and these begin to manifest in the life of Aissatou in the novel. For instance, Ramatoulaye later observes Aissatou's «sudden loss of weight, her lack of appetite, the swelling of her breasts: all indications of the child she was carrying» (Ba, 2008). Although Ramat still exhibits some elements of doubts in her mind, the explanations given by the groit appear convincing. Ramat recollects the diagnostic report of Farmata, using her cowries; «Look, I say, Look! This separate cowry, hollow side turned upwards. Look at this one, adjusting itself to the other, white side up, like a cooking pot and its cover lid. The child is in the belly. It forms one body with its mother. The two groups of cowries are separated: This indicates an unattached woman» (Ba, 2008).

As in modern medical practice, where there are repeated tests to confirm what has been diagnosed and reported by laboratory experts, in trado-medical diagnosis, such as that of divination presented in the text, people also carryout confirmation tests. The words of the groit became true after Ramat closely examined her daughter and became dumbfounded. As she rightly declares, «I recognised the unvarnished truth of her story...I remained silent. My head supported my tired head. Aissatou lowered her eyes» (Ba, 2008). The role of the groit in the novel is common among diverse ethnic groups. This correlates with the study carried out by Cook, which was acknowledged by Abdullahi. According to Cook's research, «traditional health care systems are still in use by the majority of the people not only in Africa but across the world» (Cook, 2009; Abdullahi, 2011). The scholar thereafter established that there are healers among the Yoruba, Ibibio, Igbo, Hausa, and South Africans, to mention a few. They are consulted on a daily basis by Africans, who have confidence in the results of the traditional healers in even though there are western healthcare practitioners in

their communities. The healers perform various medical interventions in traditional settings and their contributions towards promoting the health and psychological wellbeing of individuals are commendable.

**Cultural Artwork as Therapy.** This method of treatment is infused into artistic works and they could take various forms. In Achebe's *Arrow of God*, for instance, there is the practice of wood carving being the occupation of Africans specifically the Igbo people. The author has portrayed this artistic activity as a treatment method, as the rural people believe that carved wood could help in healing patients suffering from convulsions in traditional Igbo settings. Achebe captures wood works like Ezeulu's «ikenga, about as tall as a man's forearm and having two strong horns, jostled with faceless okposi of the ancestors black with the blood of sacrifice, and his short personal staff of ofo» (Achebe, 1967). The use of carved wood for impersonation of the spirits of people is common among the Igbo and other African communities where individuals strongly believe that through this medium, the souls of inhabitants can be reached and appealed. In order to justify the individuality ascribed to the arts works, the writer through the narrator reports that the «faceless okposi belonged to Nwafo. It was carved for him because of the convulsions he used to have at night. They told him to call it Namesake. Gradually the convulsions had left him» (Achebe, 1967). Carving of various forms, colours, shapes and sizes abound in African societies. Studies have shown that they perform certain functions in the communities where they are produced, as could be deduced from Achebe's fictional work above.

**Sacrifices and Prayers as Therapy.** Africans believe in the power of gods and ancestors and so they offer prayers and pour libations to them. Creative works are dotted with illustrations of this belief. Evidence, however, suggests that even prayers of goodwill for others can be therapeutic to the person offering such prayers. In Chimamanda Adichie (2006), Papa-Nnukwu's prayers for others, particularly for his wealthy son Eugene, who has neglected him, exemplifies the therapeutic value of goodwill and prayers for others. Eugene has neglected to take care of his aged father because he was 'heathen'. In spite of this neglect, he offers prayers for him that «Chukwu! Bless my son, Eugene. Let the sun not set on his prosperity. Lift the curse they have put on him» (Adichie, 2006). This is a strategy to alleviate his emotional pains and with this single act, he diverts his psychic conflicts to something pleasant and socially accepted in traditional society, which is the prayers he offer for his son, Eugene in the novel. But Kambili, the narrator remarks that she was surprised that her grandfather «prayed for Papa with the same earnestness that he prayed for himself and Auntie Ifeoma» (Adichie, 2006). Africans, especially elders discharge their pent-up emotions through various means whether positive or negative and in this narrative Papa-Nnukwu has demonstrated one of these through prayers.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the people of Umuofia believe strongly in the healing powers of their personal gods and their ancestral spirits through the offering sacrifices and prayers. These are archetypal rituals that spread across various ethnic groups in Africa and like other African literary writers; Achebe introduced them into some of his works. In the text, for instance, the narrator describes the presence of such supernatural practices: «Near the barn was a small house, «the medicine house» or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his god and his ancestral spirit. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his wives and eight children. It is also reported in the narrative that every morning, Okonkwo offers «a sacrifice of new yam and palm-oil to his ancestors he asked them to protect him, his children and their mothers in the new year» (Achebe, 1984). Okonkwo's ritual of a sacrificial offer is not peculiar to the Igbo people of Nigeria alone; it cuts across most cultures. In various African societies, sacrifices are often offered to ancestors and the gods for peace, good health and prosperity, among others. There is the cultural belief that the sick and other believers usually receive healings and blessings once their supplications and sacrifices are accepted by the gods or ancestors. This practice will promote health and psychological wellbeing of Africans, as they believe in the curative powers of ancestors and supernatural beings in their communities.

**Hot Food as traditional treatment.** It is worthy of note that Africans also apply food as method of treatment in traditional societies. Apart from the fact that food provides energy, builds the body systems, helps to resist diseases, and so on, Achebe has portrayed through the characters in *Arrow of God* that the consumption of favourite foods of patients helps to improve their health. In the novel, for instance, one can see that, «Matefi whose turn it was to cook for Ezeulu that night (they had count even in his absence) had already started preparing utazi soup. Ezeulu drank it hot and his body began gradually to return to him» (Achebe, 1984). Several studies have shown that certain food containing nutritional values are recommended to patients to enable them recover speedily. The kinds of food that can improve the health of people depend on the nature of individuals and their ethnic groups.

This form of treatment is referred to as nutritional therapy. According to the research carried out by Dashtdar et al., «nutritional therapy is the scientific application of how food, nutrients, and lifestyle can affect

our wellbeing» and every culture has their various kinds of food with rich nutritional value to nourish human body and improve health condition (Dashtdar et al., 2022). This is affirmed by the findings of the above scholars, which reveal that «traditional Chinese medicine believes that everyone's physique, temperature, and health status are different and change with age. Diet and nutrition can guide the body to restore balance by avoiding foods that exacerbate imbalances». The scholars, however, found that hot and cold foods can be consumed depending on whether the health provider wants to increase or decrease the body temperature of the patients under his care. Their further findings reveal that «food of hot nature will raise the temperature in certain areas of the body and strengthen the energy of certain organs; the body increases its activity, it is warmed up and stimulated, its metabolism is activated. As for foods of a cold or fresh nature, they will rather cool the body and slow down the circulation of blood and energy» (Dashtdar et al., 2022). In the novel, Ezeulu's body temperature is abnormal hence he is described as «shivering» when he returns and so in order to increase such temperature, he was served hot utazi food, which he drank before regaining some strength.

**The Garden as Therapy.** The liberating and psychologically rejuvenating impact of nature expressed in the ambience of a quiet garden is enacted in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The narrator evokes the choking, suffocating, and yet silent and tense atmosphere created by her father for her mother, her brother Jaja, and her. In describing the psychological liberty that eventually greets them, she draws on the metaphor of nature they experienced at Nsukka, when they visited Auntie Ifeoma. Adichie captures Auntie Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka and the «experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom» (Adichie, 2006). The Igbo people are conversant with the therapeutic effects of nature on human health. The nostalgic reflection of the heroine on the sight of her Auntie's garden is meant to trigger pleasant memories that will enhance her mood and healthy condition.

**Conclusions.** The study found that African writers are consciously integrating their cultural healthcare intervention into their artistic works, not only for the documentation but also to activate the awareness of readers on the efficacy and utilitarian functions of traditional medicines. The practice of indigenous medical practices will serve as alternative treatments for people who cannot afford western healthcare intervention in contemporary societies and also as complementary treatments.

#### **Recommendations.**

The study has revealed that Africans practice various forms of traditional medicines, which is affordable, available and effective for the treatment of ailments in societies. Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made.

1. The practice of traditional medicines should be promoted by individuals, corporate bodies and governments to complement the orthodox healthcare system.
2. Modern equipment and facilities that can help in the massive production of traditional medicines should be provided by the government through its health agencies.
3. Literary writers should continue to showcase various forms of African indigenous medical practices and treatments as well as their methods of application.
4. Researchers, health institutions, corporate bodies, communities, and so on, should work collectively to advance the practice of folk medicines, which studies have confirmed to be effective for the treatment of ailments before the emergence of biomedical therapies.

**Author Contributions:** conceptualisation, U. P. O. and E. E.; methodology, F. A.; texts selection, F. A., U. P. O. and E. E.; writing review and editing, U. P. O. and E. E.; formal analysis, U. P. O. and E. E.; research coordination, F. A.; final editing, F. A. and U. P. O.; fund acquisition, F. A.; reference style, F. A.

**Conflicts of Interest:** Authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

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#### **Народна медицина та методи лікування в художніх творах народів Африки**

У статті розглядається впровадження традиційних медичних практик в художніх творах африканських письменників. Метою статті є популяризація використання методів народної медицини для вирішення проблем зі здоров'ям пацієнтів на прикладі художніх творів письменників. Воно дозволить вшанувати, популяризувати та зберегти ці підходи в профілактичній та лікувальній медичній практиці, які притаманні народам Африки. Дослідження буде корисним для медичних працівників, дослідників, викладачів в галузі охорони здоров'я, медичних установ і осіб, відповідальних за визначення політики, які мають намір просувати традиційну систему охорони здоров'я в суспільстві. Дослідження сприятиме заохоченню використання медичними працівниками, пацієнтами та науковцями народної медицини як альтернативного методу лікування проблем зі здоров'ям у соціокультурному середовищі. Це дослідження є «польовим» та ґрунтується на бібліотечних джерелах, літературні тексти ретельно та цілеспрямовано відібрані за тематичним спрямуванням та ґрунтовно проаналізовані. Усні опитування проводилися з метою збору інформації та даних про традиційні медичні практики з перших вуст від респондентів, які володіють глибокими знаннями з зазначеної тематики. Серед респондентів були чоловіки та жінки поважного віку, які володіють глибокими знаннями в галузі традиційної медицини, з різних общин урхобо, таких як Утеллі, Акперхе-Олому, Орогун, Окпарабе, Еджекота-Огор та Агбарха-Отор. Серед опитаних були народні лікарі, ворожбити та пацієнти, які часто застосовують традиційну медицину як альтернативне та додаткове лікування. Окрім первинних матеріалів, дослідники також ознайомилися з науковими працями, які мають відношення до даного дослідження. Результати дослідження показали, що африканські суспільства багаті на різноманітні форми народної медицини, включаючи практику лікування травами, водою, теплом, з використанням мазей, гарячої їжі, терапію розмовами тощо. Дослідження показало, що африканські письменники усвідомлюють утилітарні функції народної медицини, і тому інтегрують деякі з них у свої художні твори не лише з метою фіксації у письмовому вигляді, але й для підвищення

обізнаності читачів про ефективність традиційної медицини. Різноманітні народні медичні практики можуть слугувати альтернативними та додатковими методами лікування для людей, які не можуть дозволити собі технології західної медицини в сучасному суспільстві.

**Ключові слова:** альтернативна, народна медицина, література, хвороба, самопочуття, пацієнти.