

Mkpụ as Protective Medicine among the Igbo of Nigeria

BY

Jude Chukwudi Obidigbo (PhD)

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies

Nwafor Orizu College of Education Nsugbe

Abstract

This paper investigates an aspect of African medicine among the Igbo of Nigerian called 'Mkpụ'. Popularly known as *Odịeshi* from the utterances of the uses of this type of medicine, Mkpụ is believed to render war weapons of various kinds ineffective on their wearers who now rely on this medicine for both wholesome and sometimes malevolent activities. The researcher's interest came from the events of the popular Aguleri/ Umuleri intercommunity wars in the late 1990s and the activities of the Bakkasi boys at about the same period. This study therefore uses participant observer and culture- area approaches as well as interviews and above all, analyses of the presented facts to arrive at its conclusions. It observes that the claim to Mkpụ and its various kinds as Bullet proofs, and protections against metal, bottle and wooden cuts or attacks is not an empty one but part of the medicine man's many feats in the traditional Igbo setting that her people are supposed to embrace. This is actually based on the fact that all the ingredients of this medicine are found to be in line with the traditional components of Igbo and African traditional medicine, which are largely, and quite unfortunately, denigrated or totally discarded by the supposed elite population. We therefore advocate for more study into this aspect of Igbo/ African traditional medicine in order to encourage its practice for more positive values.

Introduction

Nigerians like all Africans have rich cultural heritages contrary to the assumptions of most westernized minds. These cover all aspects of their life and may not be easily appreciated by an outsider who does not share their world views. Hitherto, the African traditional systems are resonating at various levels of the communities. One such area is African traditional medicine which has been properly defined as“... the art of using available forces of nature to prevent disease and to restore and preserve health” (Adibe, 2006: 19) and“a range of [traditional medicine](#) disciplines involving [indigenousherbalism](#) and [African spirituality](#), typically including [diviners](#), midwives, and [herbalists](#)(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_African_medicine). Everything that helps to enhance human life (or diminish or destroy it) can be called medicine in African tradition and culture, and our focus on Igbo protective medicine which may not qualify for study in western cultures.

African traditional medicines however remain largely unexplored for the supposed low profile or background of both the practitioners and those who patronise them. Yet among the locals, its richness is still preserved, though with fears of abuses. However, mindful of the sayings that knowledge is power as well the fact that abuses does not replace use, the researcher is encouraged to investigate this phenomenon with the purpose of informing the ‘unwise’ and encouraging the positives in African traditional medicine. In this effort, all real African scholars should be interested.

Nature of African/ Igbo Medicine Medicine in the African Pantheon

The first consideration in the understanding of African Traditional medicine should be given to her world view. People's world views have been described as,

A body of beliefs about the universe which are common among members of any society and existentially demonstrated in their value systems, such as their philosophy of life, social conduct and morality, folklores, myths, rites and rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings, theologies (Ifesieh, 1989: 20).

In the African world view, all beings are said to belong to either of two worlds- the visible world and the invisible world. The invisible world can be subdivided into two - the world of God and the gods situated somewhere above the firmament; and the underworld, somewhere beneath the earth surface. This is believed to be the home of the ancestors, the spirit forces, and the disembodied spirits, while the visible world is populated by men and all material surroundings familiar to them- sky, earth, rivers, forests, mountains and so forth (Madu, 1996: 5; Metuh, 1987: 62). However these worlds are not mutually exclusive since the beings in these spheres can and easily cohere or interact.

African worldviews also gave rise to the hierarchy of beings at the head of which is God or the Supreme Being. Nigerian cultures belong to the western African cultures that recognize five categories of spiritual beings in this hierarchical order - the Supreme Being, Deities, Spirit forces, Ancestors and Magical powers unlike the Bantu of East and Central Africa that have only four - Supreme Being, Spirit forces, Ancestors and Magical forces (Metuh, 1987: 63-5) .

Two significant points are worthy of mention here: First, both man and magical forces are common to the entire African pantheon. Secondly, while man falls somewhere between the Spirit forces and the ancestors in the hierarchy, medicine is grouped among the magical forces. Medicine is therefore one of the beings in the African pantheon which man must use for his own benefits since he is at the center and pivotal point of this pantheon. Opoku (1978: 140) rightly observes that,

An important aspect of the religious heritage of Africa is the recognition of the existence of mystical forces in the universe. These mystical forces manifest themselves as witchcraft, magic and sorcery which are neutral in themselves but which can be employed by those who possess the power, for beneficial or evil ends.

This is the nature of medicine and other mystical forces which we now see.

African Medicine and its Related Terms

•**Magic:** Magic has been defined by many scholars in so many different ways. For Idowu (1976:190), magic is an attempt on the part of man to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his own benefit. It is the act of influencing the course of events by the control of, and use of mystical forces believed to infest the universe (Anyanwu, 1999: 121). Underlying these definitions is the manipulation of the supernatural forces in the universe for man's ends. This is done through the use of spells and incantations, rites and rituals including sacrifices. Opoku (1978: 147-8) therefore sees all that are referred to as *suman*, or man-made objects like charms, mascots, amulets, *juju*, *mana*, *aduru*, *ogun*, and others as forms of magic since through them, occult forces are generated into action for man's ends.

For Adibe (2006: 17), magic and medicine are closely related because they both,

Arose out of man's urgent need to conquer enemies, natural phenomena and diseases...have rituals connected with spiritual belief. The supernatural powers are called upon to consecrate any magical and medicinal preparations.

They are therefore used by man for good or for bad, to conquer his environment and procure what cannot be attained in an ordinary way. Hence Anyanwu (1999: 122-3) therefore explains that Magic and Medicine are the same in their expressive functions- Productive, Protective and Destructive.

If magic is "... an attempt of man to tap and control the supernatural powers of the universe for his own benefits" (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:240) and "... medicine is the art of using the available forces of nature to prevent diseases, restore and preserve health" (Adibe, 2006: 19), it follows that magic and medicine penetrate each other. Thus magic is medicine when it uses supernatural means to enhance human life while medicine appears magical only when it also uses supernatural means. Ekwunife (1993:14) understands this well when he says that African traditional religious health- care delivery is magically oriented where sickness and healing are approached religio-holistically. It has therefore been observed that in Africa, magic and medicine can use the techniques or principles of:

(a) Homoeopathy: - The principle that like produces like, or similarity between the acts performed and the result(s) expected.

(b) **Contiguity:** - The belief that things that were once in contact with each other will continue to interact even when the contact is broken.

•**Sorcery:** This is often described as bad or destructive medicine or magic which means that it employs all the features of magic or medicine but in a negative way. According to Metuh (1999: 127), this may be achieved when people choose to transform the power of herbs, which God has put at the disposal of men, to wicked, and for evil purposes. For Awolalu (1979: 247), sorcery consists of associating oneself with supernatural powers to effect destructive and antisocial ends. Sorcerers therefore use series of procedures to effect their evil or destructive purposes.

Sorcery can secretly work over a long distance, for themselves, or on behalf of an individual or group.

•**Witchcraft:** “A witch is a person who possesses a special psychic quality which permits his spirit... to leave her body while she is asleep to inflict injuries on others or even to eat their souls” (Metuh, 1999:129). It is a manifestation of the mystical force which can either be inborn in a person, inherited or acquired in various other ways. “Witchcraft differs from sorcery in that the power of a witch is innate and usually requires no ritual activity to bring it into play” (Anyanwu, 1999:124). The witch therefore uses no material substances, utters no spells, and performs no ritual.

Traditional doctors have often been described as witch doctors because of their ability to perform uncommon or supernatural feats. However their work entails more than that except if this word is used in the restricted sense of sheer dexterity in ones field of endeavour, for which every talented/ resources human

being is said to possess some form of the witchcraft without which he cannot perform.

•**Charms:** A charm refers to an object with some mysterious, immanent and unconscious power, believed to preserve from evil, diseases, bullets, or motor accidents, or to make one succeed in trade, in a love affair, in fishing, in catching thieves, in passing examinations (Arinze, 1970: 20-21).

The point we are trying to make here is that while African Tradition Medicine per se differs from all these related terms, there is still something of these elements in the making of African medicine. This is more so because there is no strict distinction between medicine as a pharmaceutical preparation and medicine as a purveyor of a mystical power in the practice of African Traditional medicine.

Igbo Traditional Medicine

It is necessary to narrow down our discussions at this point to the Igbo because of the ubiquity of African Traditional medicine and the need to be specific. The fact is that no matter how one looks at it, Africans seem to have medicine for whatever happens and could happen to man anytime and anywhere.

The Igbo word for all medicine is *ogwu* and is one of the few common names in all Igbo dialects. Etymologically, the word *ogwu* is a combination of two syllables: ‘Q’-It is, and ‘Gwu’-finished, to mean something like ‘It is finished’. *Ogwu* for the Igbo therefore suggests the end of all discoveries and human problems (*E jechaa o gwu*). Hence the Igbo belief that it is only destiny that cannot be affected by *ogwu* (Umeh, 1997: 87; Okafor, Personal Communications, 16th April, 2008).

However, *Ogwu* is not discovered by anybody but only by the *Dibja* who is under the control of the *Agwu* Deity which is known for divination and healing (Adibe, 2006: 25; Umeh, 1999: 127). It is from this Deity that the *Dibja* claims his inspiration and responsibility and therefore offers his practices for protection.

For the limits of this paper, we will avoid full expose on the components and types of Igbo traditional medicine. Suffice it that the former is a combination of both material and non material substances chosen for their relevance to the type or purpose of the particular medicine, which includes Preventive, Curative, Achievement and Success, and Aggressive medicine/ purposes.

Protective Medicine among the Igbo

In the traditional Igbo society, protective medicine (*Nchekwa or Nchedo*) is considered so necessary because of the strong belief that no one would succeed in any adventure without some protection often to be provided by a powerful *Dibja*. This is based on the belief that ones destiny can be negatively affected by the forces of evil; human and non- human alike.

Protective medicine is different from the preventive medicine in the sense that while the latter would prevent an occurrence (for instance an outbreak of disease) the former protects the individual from physical, psychological, and spiritual harms should anything happen (Onyekwe, Personal Communications, 24th September, 2008). *Nchekwa (or Nchedo)* could be properly called an antidote. However in Igbo tradition medicine, there is no strict demarcation between the two as a particular medicine could serve both purposes.

Types of Ọgwụ Nchekwa

“Ọbịara egbu m gbuo onwe ya”- Back to Sender: Used not only to ward off an evil attack but to send it back to the source

“Ọgwụ Amusu” (Amagba in some area): Used to protect oneself/ household against the attack of witches.

“Mgbụ Nsị” (Protection against poisons): This is of two types: The first believed to be matched on and manifested by the swelling or cancer of the feet (‘Nsị nzọta’ or ‘Enyi’ and serious food poisoning that can lead to death.

“Mkpụ” (Antidote to all possible physical pains and injuries caused by weapons): This is our area of concentration in this research which we now discuss.

Mkpụ: The ‘Ọdịeshi’ Connection

The Igbo word Mkpụ is an adjectival noun which simply means the ability to render blunt or ineffective. This already sounds connected with cutting devises or weapons. Mkpụ therefore is a name given to a group of Igbo traditional medicines designed to protect one from physical harms caused by weapons especially in a situation of war or violence. This medicine which is evidenced to be ancient has recently been popularized among the Igbo in Nigeria by the Aguleri /Umuleri war of April to August 1999 and rise of the Bakkassi boys shortly afterwards, and which incidents became the plot for such home videos as ISSAKABA (VOLS. I, II, III) among others.

The war that broke out between these neighbouring communities over a piece of land was said to be an offshoot of an earlier one of 1995. And this time it is the Aguleri people that wanted to avenge the supposed injustices meted on them when a Local Government chairman that was supposed to

help resolve the earlier conflict only aided his Umuleri people. This revenge also started on his burial day and so the spontaneous resistance from the Umuleri people. But the Umuoba- Anam and the whole of Anam community soon joined the war against Umuleri that left many deaths and devastated homes in its tracks.

An eye witness account reveals that shooting would start quite early in the morning and last till evening with few surprises at nights. In these communities not more than 2km apart from each other, the war was also both confrontational and guerilla-like. Because survival was necessary, it is not surprising that people took the available option- Mkpụ. Therefore, instead of the usual pains and cries of war, a new vocabulary - *Ọdịeshi* which literarily means 'It does not leak' or 'penetrate' was born and has remained in use till date.

What cannot penetrate, why and how? These are the questions we shall now address.

Types of Mkpụ/ Ọdịeshi

These include: Mkpụ Egbe (Bullet Proofs), Mkpụ Mma (Protection from knife and other metal Cuts), and Mkpụ Bottle (Protection from Bottle cuts), and Mkpụ Ụtalị (Protection from wooden attacks):

All our informants reveal that there are many different ways of preparing each of these types and that their degrees of efficiency and tenacity depend on the expertise of the traditional doctor and the materials used.

We can only briefly explain each of them here without delving into the substances used, methods of Institution and operation, and the prohibitions for the economy of space,

while trying to represent the general views of our respondents/informants.

A. Mkpụ Egbe (Bullet Proofs)

Mkpụ Egbe serves as protection against all weapons propelled by gun powder (Udealor, Personal Communications, 9th May, 2009). It is made in three discernible categories: in the first category the gun does not sound at all, in the second category locally called '*uvio*', the gun may sound or fire but the bullets are dispersed in different directions, while in the third example the bullet can touch the body but not penetrate it.

Mkpụ Egbe is said to be the greatest, most complex, and consequently most difficult of all Mkpụ both from its preparations and uses. For the traditional doctors, most Mkpụ Egbe can also serve for one or two of the other types. Indeed the researcher encountered the greatest difficulties in getting them to open up on Mkpụ Egbe for the following reasons:

- i) The outburst of violence and clashes among communities known to be vast in these practices means that the police are out to hunt down any one suspected to be producing these medicines. Some communities still live with the memory of seeing some of their best traditional doctors harassed, arrested or even detained in this regard.
- ii) The making of a powerful Mkpụ Egbe involves many herbs, roots and some animal parts that the traditional doctors felt could not be told in an ordinary session.
- iii) Most of those who claimed to know the secrets/ rudiments of this type of Mkpụ reveal that some of the materials used are dirty or outlawed.

However, the researcher's encounter with Udealor (Personal Communications, 9th May, 2009) was quite revealing. He was the principal traditional doctor of the Umuoba Anam group and was kind enough to invite some of his clients especially the principal men of the vigilant group in the area who also took part in the Aguleri/Umuleri war for our interviews and experimentations. Suffice it that we saw and experimented with five different types of Mkpụ Egbe which details cannot be relayed in this medium for lack of space.

B. Mkpụ Mma

Means protection from knife and similar sharp metal cuts. It appears to be next in importance to Mkpụ Egbe simply because these objects are more frequently used as instruments/weapons of war than the axe for instance, and bottle, which may be equally sharp. Nevertheless if well made, all our informants say that it can also serve for the axe, arrow and bottle. Remarkably our informants are also more open in volunteering information on the Mkpụ mma than on Mkpụ Egbe because of the lesser risk of abuse and consequently of incriminating the user. As in Mkpụ Egbe however, the materials and methods are many and vary almost with every *Dibja*.

C. Mkpụ Bottle and/ or Osi

As already indicated, the Mkpụ mma can serve for bottle in most cases but can be made exclusively for the latter.

Mkpụ Osi protects its possessor from pains and injuries resulting from wooden attacks and appears to be the least in importance. Most informants regard it as a child's play because most school children also use it to shield themselves from the teacher's wallop in schools.

In all, our informants all agree that most of the simpler protective medicines last between one and two days.

Evaluations and Recommendation

The need to present the herbs and other components of Igbo traditional medicine and demonstrate them may be paramount at this stage but cannot be done here for want of space. However the researcher has this privilege and most of the traditional doctors' words for whoever would want to further verify their claims.

Nonetheless, having gone through the whole process, the following facts appear most vivid and worth restating:

- The making of “Mkpụ” or “Ọdịeshi” is in line with the general principles of African/ Igbo traditional medicine earlier outlined. The worldview, reality of magical forces and the components of African medicine were all repeatedly displayed in this category of medicine.
- What most people would want to regard as magic and so dismiss by a wave of hand, rather presents to the researcher as a discovery and exploration of some of the secrets of nature which African Traditional Medicine is.

Thus, when herbalists talk about the signature of plants that symbolize their functions (Ilonzo, Personal Communications, 12th April, 2008), they mean that every herb/ plant has medicinal values for which God created it. When discovered, they go a long way to improve people's health.

- Similarly, we discovered that one of the most common herbal components of all the protective medicines is what is known locally here as the Stubborn Grass. Almost all our traditional doctor informants agree that it is very useful in protections from all physical and spiritual attacks. One would therefore

ask why the stubborn grass? Why indeed is this grass more difficult to cut than most, if not all others? The answer would definitely not be found in the soil component or so much in the physical appearance of the plant but in its very/ intrinsic nature, which power the *Dibja* harness for their medicine.

•Furthermore, the prohibitions or taboos of some traditional medicine are sometimes thought to be arbitrary and difficult/ impossible to keep so as to excuse the inefficiency of the medicines. The researcher rather discovered that most of the prohibitions are kept for two connected reasons. The first one is because they have intrinsic connections with the major components of the medicine that their uses would introduce negative reactions on the concoctions. The second reason is that the prohibitions may be exaggerated so as to help the users distance themselves from the prohibited actions or materials. For instance, not taking red palm oil might have included not sitting on the local pounding instrument (*ikwe*) used for processing the nuts. Little wonder some *Dibja* insist that some of the prohibitions/ restrictions can be manipulated with the introduction of other antidotes.

In this wise therefore, the researcher sees science than fiction; control of nature than superstition, all which squares up better with the proper understanding of the *Dibja* or the *Dibja's* understanding of himself in Igbo tradition and culture. Few words here:

•In spite of his being called *okala mmadu okala mmu* with his often disguised frightful appearance, the *Dibja* simply means Di- master; Abja- Wisdom= Master of Wisdom. He is therefore very much like a well trained philosopher, wise one, doctor, teacher or rabbuni in other cultures and civilizations.

The beginning of the *Dibja's* career gives further credence to the on-going debate. There is normally a period of preparation

or apprenticeship, of learning the secrets of nature, especially for one who is not personally picked by the Agwụ (Spirit of medicine, divination or healing). Furthermore, whether so picked or not, the ritual of installation of the Dibia goes with what is called 'ìtùwa/ítawa anya and ntị' Dibia (literarily peeling off the eye and ear of the Dibia) so as to make him see and hear beyond the ordinary (Umeh, 1999: 122-3). Many will be surprised to learn that this is not done with the knife but with some herbal medicines.

As obscure as Igbo protective medicine is therefore, Igbo scholars have the tasks of studying every aspect of it more deeply so as to present it to the wider world.

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List of Informants

S/N	NAME	AGE	PLACE	STATUS	DATE
1	Ilonzo (Ezenwayi)	65 +	Awka	Herbalist	12/4/08
2	Edoziuno Anayo	67	Aguleri-Otu	Native Doctor	14/04/08
3	Chikelue Sunday	24	Aguleri-Otu	Student	14/04/08
4	Igbago Ejike	90 +	Aguleri-Otu	Native Doctor	15/04/08

5	Okwuife Daniel	17	Anakụ	Student	15/04/08
6	Nonso Okafor	19	Anakụ	Student	15/04/08
7	Nebeife Onyeka	17	Anakụ	Student	15/04/08
8	Vincent Okafor	35	Ụmụje	Native Doctor	16/04/08
9	Ngoesinam(Diiru)	62	Nteje	Native Doctor	25/07/08
10	Hilary Chigbata	24	Nando	Student	23/07/08
11	Udenze Okafor	26	Ụmụọba Anam	Native Doctor/ Ex-warrior	25/04/06
12	Okonkwo	70	Igbakwụ	Native Doctor	23/07/08
13	Onyekwe Chidozie	42	Igbakwụ	Native Doctor	24/07/08
14	IG Udealor (Achuwanike)	75	Ụmụọba Anam	Native Doctor/ Community Leader	9/05/09
15	Onuora (Odaanike).	47	Ụmụọba	Ex-Warrior/ Security man	9/05/09