

# Indigenous Knowledge and Practices for Managing COVID-19 Pandemic among the Ebira- Toa of Kogi State

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## Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic took the world unawares by its sudden appearance and fast spread across the world. The disease, which has no known cure, caused millions of deaths in Europe, Asia, America and Africa, among other continents. However, while fatalities keep rising across the world, Africa has recorded a slower spread rate and lower death rate compared to other parts of the world. Since there is no known cure, only promising vaccines, it may be expedient to attribute the low fatality rate in Africa to the role of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Among these practices is the Ebira cultural knowledge in herbal usage and other cultural behaviours used in the prevention and management of pandemics like COVID-19. This paper examines traditional herbal preparations and cultural practices crucial to the prevention and management of pandemics using a qualitative research method.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge, practices, pandemic, COVID-19

## Introduction

In November 2019, the world was caught unawares by the sudden outbreak and rapid spread of the zoonotic disease known as coronavirus disease, code-named COVID-19. The disease, which is said to have originated from Wuhan in China, snowballed into a global pandemic with no known cure, resulting in high numbers of deaths around the world. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, the World Health Organization reported over 24,464 deaths from COVID-19 in Africa (WHO 2020). In Asia, Europe and America where the fatalities are higher, various governments through

their Agencies for Disease Control have devised measures meant to mitigate the continuous spread of the disease. These include hygienic practices such as disinfection of the environment, the use of sanitizers to clean surfaces, washing of hands with soap under running water, controlled sneezing and use of facemasks, social distancing, and isolation of victims of the disease, among several other clinical and social distancing practices.

While these measures were adopted as part of global best practices for combatting the pandemic, in Africa, other measures based on indigenous knowledge and cultural practices associated with pandemics came to the fore as a response to the crisis.

In African cosmology, it is believed that for every disease, there is a cure in the forest and that includes the recent coronavirus disease. Indigenous knowledge may vary from country to country in each continent, so also the cultural practices of diverse ethnic communities.

This paper, therefore, discusses the indigenous knowledge and cultural practices of the Epira-Toa people of north central Nigeria in response to epidemics such as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The methodology of the research was a hybrid of the critical method used in the arts and the investigative, analytical method of scientific research. The study is predicated on the view that certain indigenous practices in treating other diseases with similar signs and symptoms to COVID-19, if critically considered, might offer a panacea to the current pandemic that has yet no known cure.

In Nigeria, statistics show that in May 2020, the country recorded at least 200 confirmed cases nationwide (NCDC monthly report 2020), and contact tracing arrangements were put in place to track the contacts of those who had tested positive. This was in addition to a 14-day quarantine arrangement for those arriving from outside the country. However, in the beginning, the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria was a very difficult struggle because of so many variables, which included among others: lack of knowledge about the disease, conspiracy theories about the disease, and the poor state of healthcare services. The puzzling thing is that Africa, which the whole world had thought/expected to be the worst hit, is the least affected of all the regions of the world. This makes one wonder what Africa as well as Nigeria is doing right and brings up the perspective of

managing (the) pandemic with the use of indigenous knowledge and/or practices.

### **Herbal Approaches to Managing Epidemics in Africa**

It is common knowledge that Africans are well connected with their natural environment. Iwuoha, Ezeibe and Ezeibe (2020) posited that African people rely on their flora and fauna for nourishment and medical remedies. They consume herbal preparations and concoctions either for the treatment or prevention of diseases. Many indigenous Africans prefer to use herbs for the treatment and prevention of diseases and this has helped to strengthen their immune system over the years (Iwuoha et al. 2020). African traditional society is blessed and has developed overtime and space knowledge of medicine as a means of managing various ailments and conditions. Orisakwe, Orish and Nwanaforo (2020) acknowledged that the knowledge of herbal plants in Africa can be used in solving health problems related to COVID-19.

Among the Fulani people for instance, diseases such as cough and catarrh are considered to be weather-induced illnesses. They use a combination of local herbs, seeds, and fruits and vegetables such as lime, pepper, onions and tamarind as remedy. According to an oral source (Oct. 2020), the Fulani use the stomach of a live frog on the eyes of the jaundice patient to remove the yellow coloration and thus the patient will be cured.

Similarly, information obtained from a focus group discussion indicates that the Kanuri and Hausa ethnic groups both use the plant with the botanical name, *Artemisia annua*, known as *Tazargade* in Hausa and *Tukakalu* in Kanuri, for the treatment of malaria accompanied with high fever. The plant is soaked in water for some time to soften. The soft paste produced will then be rubbed generously on the body of the patient. The patient is also given a small amount of the water used to soak the plant to drink, especially if the patient exhibits signs of chills and rigor. Also, a little amount of freshly crushed *Tukakalu* leaves is placed in a small clay pot containing hot charcoals, and the patient is made to inhale the fumes. This method is common among the Kanuri (Oral source, Oct. 2020).

The locally-brewed herbal infusion from *Artemisia annua*, also known as *Abo-Evango* among the Ebira, *Tazargade* in Hausa and *Tukakalu* among the Kanuri, could be used to alleviate the symptoms of COVID-19, which are similar to those of malaria. This could help in

curtailing, and in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. African people have relied on their knowledge of bio-diversity and the eco-system to enhance their livelihood and management of issues such as disease outbreaks and disasters. In Nigeria, there exist over 200 ethnic groups and they all have their unique cultural practices. The Ebira, Fulani, Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Shuwa, Kanuri, and virtually all the ethnic groups use indigenous knowledge in the management of disease conditions within their immediate environment.

Furthermore, the food, dress, speech, and other communal activities of African traditional societies have been guided over the years by highly cherished norms and etiquettes. These indigenous socio-cultural practices include approved behaviour and some behaviour termed as taboo targeted at guiding and moderating conduct in traditional societies. For example, forbidding the eating of certain animals, the universal culture of hand washing before meals, social conventions regarding sneezing, coughing and spitting in public, as well as prescribed dress codes in certain African societies may be adopted as means of preventing the spread of any pandemic, including COVID-19.

The Shuwa-Arab are an ethnic group found around the Lake Chad region of West Africa, and are the inhabitants of Kalabalge, Damasak, Gamboru and Ngala local government areas of Bornu State, Nigeria. The Shuwa-Arab are said to be pastoralists who migrated from Arabia and settled in the Chad Basin area (Holl, 2003). Shuwa-Arab women dress by wrapping themselves from head to toe with a large piece of soft fabric known as *lafayya*. Similarly, their men also use turbans to cover the entire head including the nose, ears, and mouth, which may appear similar to the directive for mandatory use of face masks by WHO in 2019-till date. This age-long tradition of wearing *laffaya* and turban among the Shuwa-Arab is a socio-cultural practice to protect them against the desert dust and dry winds of the harmattan and may protect against airborne virus diseases (Oral source, 2020).

One of the common practices of Ebira people is eating with the bare hands, which necessitates the habitual washing of hands before eating. It is noteworthy that one of the leading means of transmission of COVID-19 is through touching a contaminated surface or hand and subsequent contact of the contaminated hand with the mouth, eyes or the nose. Therefore, the practice of handwashing before eating as social convention of the Ebira people can help control the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Thus, sensitization on hand washing as part of the COVID-19 pandemic prevention protocols adapts easily with the Ebira people's hygienic practices.

### **The Ebira-Tao People and their Eco-Cultural Life**

The Ebira people are an ethno-linguistic group found in North-Central Nigeria. They are believed to have migrated from the Jukun Kingdom of Kwara, North of the Benue River, to their present abode in Kogi and other surrounding neighbouring states. Today, however they are found in large numbers across Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, and Edo states. The Ebira are sub-divided into Ebira Tao (Okene), Ebira Koto (Kotokarfi), Ebira Igara (Edo) and Ebira Agatu (Nasarawa) (Okene, 2000). The Ebira Tao parade a very rich culture and traditional knowledge of herbs and its use in the management of diseases.

### **Methodology**

This study employed the qualitative method approach, using both primary and secondary sources of literature. Secondary sources included information drawn from journals, articles, and published books, while primary sources were obtained through informal conversations, unstructured oral interviews and narrations from respondents.

### **Ebira cultural knowledge of herbal medicine in the management of common endemic diseases such as malaria**

Popular among the Ebira cultural practices is the age-long use of herbs in the management of malaria, indigenously known as *Evangoro*. The Ebira people use a combination of plants, shrubs, roots and barks in the treatment and management of malaria. These include a sizeable portion of the plants listed in table 1.

**Table 1: Traditional medicinal herbal mix for treating infections like malaria, etc.**

Concoction	Common name of ingredients	Part of plant	Local name	Botanical name
Abo	Orange	Leaves	<i>Avioromi</i>	<i>Citrus sinensis</i>
	Banana	Leaves	<i>Aviogeed</i>	<i>Musa paradisiaca</i>
	Neem	Leaves and bark	<i>Avi/ochidogonyaro</i>	<i>Azadirachta indica</i>

Lemon grass	Leaves	<i>Avi tea</i>	<i>Cymbopogon citratus</i>
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The leaves and parts of the listed plants are combined in an earthen pot, put on a fire to boil for 20 to 30 minutes to enable it infuse. The boiled infusion is referred to as *Abo* in Ebira language. The patient is given a maximum of a cupful or at least a few gulps to drink several times a day. The patient is also required to have a steam bath by sitting on a chair or some raised platform, under which a bucket of the steamy infusion is placed. The patient is then covered with a large piece of thick fabric to prevent steam from escaping while steaming the body. The patient remains there for some minutes depending on the individual's level of endurance. After this steaming process, the patient would break out in a sweat and this helps to relieve or break the cycle of the fever in most cases.

**Table 2: Other traditional medicines for treating ailments in Ebira land**

Botanical name	Local name (Ebira)	Presentation	Use	Method of preparation
<i>Occimum canum</i>	<i>Irerueva</i>	Leaves	Management of diabetic and general wellness and vitality	A decoction of leaves in water mixture
<i>Anisopus mannil</i>	<i>Omuaruta</i>	Leaves	Management of high blood pressure and jaundice in infants	A decoction of leaves in water mixture
<i>Abrus precatorious</i> L.	<i>Ohinehine</i>	Leaves	For treatment of cough, tonsillitis and minor cuts and wounds	Leaves are grinded and then mixed with honey or plant juice from fresh leaves. Grounded leaves can also be used on cuts and wounds
<i>Caesalpinia</i> Spp.	<i>Aviigori</i>	Leaves	For management of hallucination	Leaves can be infused in water for 3 hours before consumption
<i>Ageratum conizoides</i>	<i>Avihupahupa</i>	Leaves	For management of high blood	Decoction of leaves in water to be

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Botanical name	Local name (Ebira)	Presentation	Use	Method of preparation
			pressure	taking orally

(Curled from Atawodi et al., 2014)

### Use of Organic Foodsthat May Help in the Management of Pandemics among the Ebira People

The Ebira people are well known for their agricultural activities. Organic farm produce such as grains, tubers and vegetables, commonly grown in the area are the constituents of basic nutrition for them. Also, in abundance are vegetables, popularly known to be rich in vitamins which help in boosting the immune system of the inhabitants. There is hardly an indigenous community in Nigeria that does not consume fresh vegetables as part of their daily diet. According to oral sources, the Ebira are known for using a variety of vegetables in their meals, among which are the pumpkin and *ireru*, basil leaves. Pumpkin and basil leaves have many medicinal qualities and these help in strengthening the immune system. Another leafy vegetable is *Efo*, also called spinach or greens. Spinach, basil and pumpkin contain vitamins C, A, and K as well as riboflavin, niacin and folates; these are known to enhance the human immune system(Ogwu, 2019).

### Conclusion

The coronavirus disease may be a new pandemic that has plagued the world in recent times; however, as a zoonotic and respiratory disease, its signs and symptoms are not radically different from those of some of the tropical diseases found in Africa. Therefore, Africa's traditional knowledge and cultural practices towards certain tropical diseases such as malaria, etc. and its social lifestyles, norms, values and etiquette, if properly harnessed and deployed towards fighting the novel coronavirus, may offer a panacea or even a palliative to COVID-19. The Ebira people, who have used their indigenous herbal knowledge in the treatment of ailments in the past, can also be engaged as part of the programme to indigenously manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This in combination with positive African cultural norms, practices and behaviours can be used to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

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Use of herbal plants in the management of malaria by Ebira people