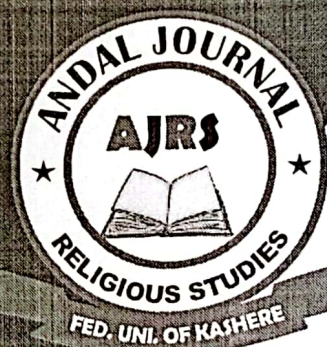


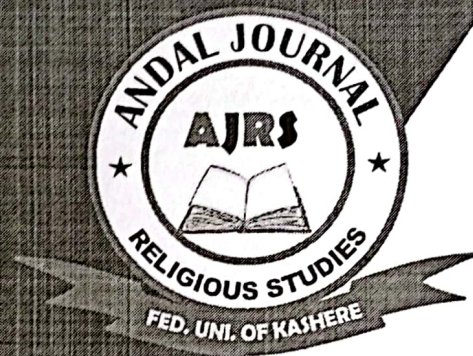
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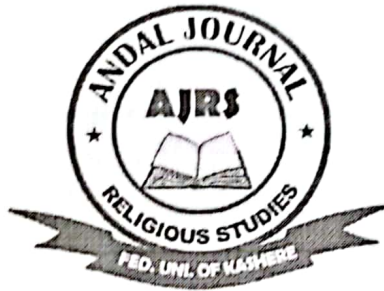
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Interplay between The African Traditional and Islamic Medicines as Practiced Among The Yoruba *Jalabi* Practitioners

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Abstract

The practice of Medicine is as old as man himself. This is because man is created to experience different phases of life as he lives; sickness is one of them. He gets healed through medicaments. The medical system depends on belief, culture, orientations and configurations of the people. African Traditional Medicine is one of the systems of medications. Another is Islamic method. With the contacts between Islam and Yoruba people, there had been interference between the two with noticeable areas of interplay which are responsible for some misconceptions in the society. In fact, many Yoruba Muslims could not differentiate between the two forms of medications. This paper therefore examined those areas of interplay with a view to separating the grain from the chaff. These include the case of sacrifice, herbs, incantation (*ruqyah*) among others. Analytical method of research was adopted to drive home the objectives of this paper. It was discovered that there is high level of interplay between the two systems, with negative effects on Islamic system. It is also discovered that *Jalabi* practitioners are the major actors in this regard. Also, the paper revealed that inadequate knowledge of Islam by the practitioners is responsible for the interlace. The paper therefore concluded that since Islam has its own medical system, Yoruba Muslim scholars should take up the challenge to engage in the medical practice and write to explain the permissibility status of the items and methods used by the *Jalabi* practitioners. This will help in sanitizing the system and eliminate unwholesomeness.

Key words: *Medicine, Jalabi, African, Misconceptions, Yoruba*

Introduction

The practice of medicine to cure different forms of ailments is as old as man. This is because sickness is one of the basic characteristics of life. The nature of existence of man is designed by his creator in a manner that he is prone to different type of diseases as he lives. He therefore needs to be cured, for him to continue to live as expected. In so doing, different methods of medications evolved and continue to develop gradually as man develops. Each of these methods is occasioned by time, place, and cultural beliefs among others. In modern times, the methods of medication include orthodox, traditional and Islamic healing systems. The orthodox is a system in which medical doctors and other healthcare professionals such as nurses, pharmacists, and therapists, treat symptoms and diseases using drugs, radiation, or surgery.¹ It is also called allopathic medicine, biomedicine, conventional medicine, mainstream medicine, or western medicine.¹ The traditional medicine on the other hand is defined as the sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences that are indigenous to different cultures which are used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve or treat physical and mental illnesses.² The Islamic medicine is the therapeutic system embedded in the use of Islamic prescriptions as contained in the glorious Qur'an or prophetic curatives as methods to treat ailments.³

Over times, it has been observed that there are some elements of interference between what is Islamic and what is traditional method of medication and this is so pronounced in Yorubaland. This is occasioned by contacts between Islam and the people of Africa, West Africa and Yorubaland in particular. One hardly differentiates between what is Islamic and what is traditional in medical prescriptions. This paper is therefore, an attempt to examine the extent of intertwinement between the two with a view to coming with a position that will separate the grain from the chaff. In effect, it will assist in enhancing the understanding of many who could hardly differentiate between Islamic and traditional medical practices,

especially as typified by the *Jalabi* practitioners. This is largely responsible for the wider condemnation of *Jalabi* practice across the land.

Basic Features of Traditional Medicine

Basically, traditional medicine has three major features. These are divination, spiritualism, and herbalism. The divination is meant to make an enquiry from the spiritual realm through consultations to understand the cause(s) of a particular ailment, the extent and probably for solution. This therefore explains the connection between divination and spiritualism.⁴ Some diseases are spiritual in nature, hence the involvement of incantation or sometimes prescription of sacrifice or invocation of spirits for the purpose of healing. Herbs are specifically for medication through the use of natural plants and other substances for curative purposes. The three elements work together because the body of a man is a composition of both spiritual and physical entities. Therefore, each is central to making man experience a healthy life.

In the understanding of the Yoruba, the medical practitioners are referred to as *Onisegun* or *Oloogun*, meaning the one who engages in the science of treating and understanding diseases. They are also sometimes referred to as *Baba Alawo*, though with some distinct features.⁵ For instance, *Onisegun* may not involve himself in divination or spirituality that will call for incantations or prescription of sacrifice (*ebo*) among others while *Baba Alawo* does, because basically *Baba Alawo* usually to involve themselves in occultism and other secret dealings. It is however not uncommon to find the two elements combined in an individual.

According to Dopamu, *oogun* which ordinarily translates as medicine in Yoruba understanding often includes magic (*Idan*). He however argues that fundamentally, healing is different from magic. He explains:

Magic...is non-therapeutic in nature. It caters for the concerns that are not associated with diseases or illnesses. Human beings want victory, success, luck, protection from danger,

good harvest, successful business, success in examination, rain for crops, protection against accident, protection against forces of evil, followers, others to love them and a host of other needs. These concerns are quite distinct from pathological or therapeutic conditions of human being and they are mainly dealt with by the use of magic.⁶

The above extract indicates the margin between Magic and Medicine, though both combine in Yoruba language with the same word, *oogun*. This is quite confusing and misleading. It is even one of the reasons for the misconceptions among the Yoruba Muslims as it will be discussed later in the relevant section of this paper.

Basic features of Islamic Medicine

As previously explained, the Islamic medicine features the use and reliance on various prescriptions in the glorious Qur'an or the authentic *Sunnah* of the Prophet, as reported and compiled in the works of *hadith*. Such prescriptions include Honey (*Asal*), *Habatu Sauda* (Black seed), Garlic, Ginger, Lemon, *senna* (*Casia cutifolia*), henna (*Lawsonia Inermis*), aloes (*Aloe Vera*), *Ajwan*, *Ruman*, Olive Oil among others. It is also important to mention that some of these ingredients are commonly grown in Arabian Peninsula, though researches are going on to grow some of them in other continents, even in different species.

The Islamic medicine does not dwell on divination to find the cause of a particular ailment. It is indeed prohibited to engage in acts of divination in Islam.⁷ This does not connote the forbiddance of diagnostics, they are quite different. Divination is to find the spiritual cause of a disease⁸ while diagnostic is to understand the nature, involvement and the complexity of a particular disease in order to be properly guided in determining what to use in curing such a disease. The Islamic medicine also involves prayers and supplications which are also efficacious in curing diseases of different kinds. In some instances, the supplications are culled from the glorious Qur'an and sometimes from the authentic *hadith* of the Prophet while some were coined by scholars in the light of Qur'anic and Prophetic guidance.

There are some other basic features which often generate rumbles among the scholars of different backgrounds on the point of legality or otherwise of such practices. One of them is *Hantu*.⁹ This is act of writing the verses of the glorious Qur'an on a slate, washing off with water while the patient drinks accordingly. In some instances where such a patient cannot drink, or recite, he can be written on paper, wrapped for patient to hang on his neck or as may be directed by the expert.¹⁰ This has generated polemics among the scholars, but basically, they are permissible under strict measures. Scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah and Imam Ahmad among others are reported to allowed *hantu* as a method of Islamic medicine.

Among the Yoruba Muslims, the practitioners are popularly referred to as *Alfa* or *Alufa*. This is colloquial form of *Khalifah* which depicts someone who stood for a leader in paddling the canoe of a given society. It is often used to refer to Muslim scholars because it is believed that they stood as the deputies to the Prophet and took charge of his responsibilities. The word *Alfa*, which is the general name for Muslim scholars is synonymous with *Jalabi*. The Mallam whose expertise is well pronounced in the aspect of curative is therefore known and popularly referred to as *Oni-Jalabi*.

The Concept of *Jalabi*

The word *Jalabi* has become a household name among the Yoruba Muslims. It is a nomenclature dedicated to the Muslim scholars who engage in solving the problems of the fellow Muslims, through different means. Etymologically, Afiz and Hassan observe as follows:

Jalabi is a domesticated Arabic word stemming from the tri-consonantal Arabic root of j-l-b, which has got various meanings and connotations. According to the classic Arabic lexicographers, al-jalb is synonymous with al-Jazb, meaning to draw or attract. It could also mean to drag something from one place to another if one considers its grammatical inflexion and transitivity as in *jalabahu, yajlibuhu* or *yajlubuhu jalaban* or *jalban*.

Likewise, it is synonymous with *al-Kasb*, meaning to earn a living or to obtain something as in *jalaba li nafsihi*, or to bring about benefit, good luck or fortune as in *jalaba naf'an*. These meanings are particularly relevant, as they not only depict the material end of some Ulama's activities, but also the type of spiritual assistance commonly rendered to their clientele to repel evil and bring about fortune. With regard to this meaning, the general statement: *jalb al-manfaah wadaf'u al-madarrah* (bringing about the benefit and warding off the evil) is very well applicable.¹¹

The above extract, despite the ranging controversies on the legality or otherwise of this practice, seems to have conveyed the conception of *Jalabi* among the Yoruba Muslims. It is ordinarily to render a spiritual assistance or services by the experts with a view to receiving remuneration in return of the service rendered to those who consulted them. The practitioners are sometime referred to as *Onise Alfa* or *Ise Alfa*. This can be better understood from the works of Shaykh Adam who categories Muslims scholars into different groups. These are, the teachers (*Mu'allimun*), the preachers (*Wu'ahz*), the worshipper or ascetics (*Zuhad* or *Ubad*) otherwise known as *Sufi* and the healers.¹² It is not uncommon to find a Mallam combining at least two of these elements together, especially the first two are easily combined by an individual while the last two are also easily combined by an individual. This is possible due to their closeness in nature. For instance, it is possible for a Mallam who has *Madrassa* to add up preaching as part of the training he gives to his students. It is also easy for a Sufi Mallam to be consulted for spiritual assistance, since they mainly engage in acts of *Ibadah* at all time, thereby making them combine the two together.

Basically, Afiz and Hassan later divide *Jalabi* practitioners into four groups. These are:

1. Those who are consulted by people for special prayer using, among others, the Quran, and other supplications carefully documented and transmitted from one generation to other. This category may best be designated as Quran-oriented, as they do not mix this practice with other methods of healing, whether traditional or prophetic.

2. Those who combine the traditional methods of healing with the Islamic, and perform different types of divinations, such as *Khat al-Raml* (sand-cutting or geomancy), Jin companionship, etc.
3. Those who have received special training in traditional but not Islamic healing method are referred to as *Onisegun* (herbalist). Usually, there is no difference between this category and the traditional herbalists.
4. The *Gbajue* type (fraudsters), who lead their lives on deceptions and lies. This category is replete with youth and emerging Alfas, who are desperate to become wealthy overnight and do not have the mastery of the *ise Alfa* per se.¹³

It is these *Jalabi* practitioners that are approached by people for healing, having believed that they are the custodians of Islamic heritage. But, in the bid to meet up with the demand of the people, coupled with their inadequate knowledge, many of them engage in unwholesome practices, such as combination of *Haram* with *Halal* substances to seek medication. It is even discovered that many of the practitioners do not know what Islamic medicine is really all about.

Interlacement between Traditional and Islamic Medicine

Out of the belief that Islam allows medicine and medications through different means, as long as it does not entail what is prohibited, the practice of Islamic medicine among the Muslims in Yourbaland has enabled the interference of what is traditionally local to the society with what is Islamically provided for in the text as may be available in the immediate environment where the Prophet lived and where the revelation took place. What is largely responsible for this is the reversion of many Yoruba Muslims to Islam. The scholars among the reverts therefore took the stage over as priests in their former religions and people consult them for their ailment both physical and metaphysical. It should be understood that many of these of scholars were without adequate knowledge of Islam, not to talk of medication due to different barriers of which language is number one. This is followed by environmental differences. Another one is little or no access to Islamic

literature and medical ingredients. They therefore come under *ijtihad*¹⁴ to create a premise for Islamization of local methods, especially those that were thought to be of Islamic compliance among them and apply them to the Muslim.

One of the areas of intertwinement between traditional and Islamic medicine is the case of sacrifice otherwise known as *Ebo* or *Ipese* in Yoruba practice. This is done, after due consultations, to appease gods for both spiritual and super-spiritual breakthrough. In some instances, these are placed at T-junctions, in the bush, at the shrine among other places as may be prescribed by *Ifa* priest. In catering for demands to get to the root of every problem and get divine prescriptions for solutions, the scholars of nascent Muslim community, with little or no knowledge of *Istikhar*¹⁵ deployed the use of sand-cutting (*KhatuRaml*) for divinations. At the end of the consultations, instead of *Ebo*, which the traditionalists direct their client to offer as explained above, Alfa direct their clients to give them out to the poor, the needy, the beggars, the imam who leads *Salat*, among others.

Another important aspect of interplay is between herbs (*agbo* or *agunmu*) and *hantu*. The later is the act of writing some verses or Arabic inscriptions on a slate, washing them off and drinking same for curative purposes. Yoruba medical practitioners used to prepare some medicines either in liquid (*agbo*) or powder (*Agunmu*) forms from natural herbs that are available around. They may use the leaves, stems, root, and flowers among others as ingredients thereof. Some Alfas who engage in medicals used to make prescriptions with these local contents, though give out as Islamic prescriptions. This is done in replace of Prophetic prescriptions some of which were mentioned above.

Scholars are unanimous on the acceptability of such prescriptions as long as they fall within permissible. Hence, some of the newly emerging modern Islamic medicine practitioners who operate within the limit of prophetic prescriptions also engaged in the use of items and substances that are local to the society. Some of them even identify some items within the local environments. For instance, the Black seed is identified as *Eso Asofun eyeje*, Honey

is *Oyin*, Olive is *Adi*, *Galic* is *Ata Ile*, Cloves is *Kanafuru*, Ginger is *Atale*¹⁶ and many more. They held the view that items that are local with proven record of healing and medical importance can be used for Medicine and are Islamically allowed. The interwoven nature of the two has accounted for classification of both Islamic and Traditional medicines are unorthodox medicine and even the Nigerian government registered them with one name.¹⁷

Another aspect of interplay is the use of *Ofo* (incantation) and *Ruqyah* by many of the medical practitioners. Incantations in Yoruba mythology are meant to invoke the spirits for different purposes, and in this context for the purpose of healing. This, sometimes goes with some preparations which the incantations are meant to complement. *Alfa* over times have argued the availability of similarities within the Islamic contexts, thereby justifying their claim of admissibility within the Islamic context. Truly, not all the *Ruqyah* supplications are contained the Qur'anic verses or are *Mathurat* (traditional to Islamic sources). This however does not mean they are not Islamic. This is because many of them are coined by scholars and they are in line with Islamic principle of *Tawhid* (Monotheism). It should be mentioned that some of the *Alfas* who advocate their admissibility in Islam have even gone further to coin many of such which are strange and contradictory to Islamic tenet. There are many of them that contained the names of *jins* and other creatures which are meant to be invoked for assistance. It is not uncommon to come across some of these with *Khatimi* of different features, sometimes combined with Qur'anic verses.¹⁸

The Islamic views on the Traditional methods of Medication

Having identified various ways of interplay between the Islamic and Traditional medicines, especially as it is practiced by the Yorubas, what is intended here is to examine them according to Islamic perspective. This is imperative because there had been a lot of

misapplication, misrepresentations and mixing up of the two which has led to condemnation from different angles. People hardly differentiate between *Alfa* and *Alawo* or *Onisegun* because of mixtures between *oogun* as a medicine, magic or spirituality. Each of these elements differs as indicated above, but only known to the scholars and not the masses.

Basically, Islam employs *halal* and *haram* as the guiding principles for medications. In other words, medicine should be practiced within the limits of *halal*, while *haram* must be shunned in its entirety, except in the cases of necessity which involves treats to life. The Prophet clears the air when he stated that Allah will not make what is *haram* a cure for Muslims in every situation. The *hadith* reads:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمْ يَجْعَلْ شِفَاءَكُمْ فِي مَا حَرَّمَ عَلَيْكُمْ

Allah will not put your medication in what He prohibited on you¹⁹

This *hadith* is explicit on finding medications to every form of disease within the limits of *halal*, though there is an exception to this, where life is involved. So, regardless of whether or not a medication item is local to the environment or foreign (mentioned in Quran or Hadith), it must pass *halal* test.

Also, Islam forbids magic in its entirety and any Muslim who involves in it is cursed by Allah (Q.10:77 and 20:69). The Prophet also counted it among seven grave sins that Muslims should do away with.²⁰ Scholars declare magicians as *Kuffar*²¹ and usually rate it along with Shirk, in line with the same Hadith much as Umar the second *Khalifah* fixed

execution as punishment for magicians.²² This was upheld by the four founders of schools in Islam, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hambali.²³

However, where an individual is a victim of magic, courtesy of witchcraft or spells among others, Islam allows and prescribes means of rescuing such a victim. This may include the recitation of verses of the glorious Qur'an, such as *Suratul Fatiah*, *Ayatul-Qurshiyah*, *Ma'widhatayn*, *Suratul-Ikhlās* among others or any supplication from the Prophet as recorded in authentic *Sunnah*. There are specific means of treating magic which scholars have worked on. In essence therefore, Islam allows treating a victim of magic but not engaging in the art of magic.

The spiritual healing is also provided for in Islam and it is permissible for Muslims to provide and seek spiritual solution to their problems whenever the need arises. There are some diseases as indicated above that are deeply rooted in spirituality than physical. An instance is where a sickness is caused by jinn. This usually required supplication (*ruqyyah*), though people still engage themselves in divination of different sort.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the interconnectedness and interrelatedness between African traditional medicine and Islamic medicine, especially as could be seen among the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria. Undoubtedly, medicine occupies a unique position in the scheme of things in the life of man, hence every society has its method of treating different ailments based on its cultural background and belief among others. The Islamic medicine on the other hand is exclusive to Islam and Muslim medical practitioners are expected to act within the limits of its principles. In reality, the practice of Islamic medicine outside the immediate environment of revelation of Islam is not without some mix-ups with other systems. This therefore necessitated some interplays which seemed covering up the Islamic

system in our society. This is because many of the *Jalabis* who are the actors lacked basic knowledge of Islam and wanted to explore every means to solve the problem at hand.

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16. *Istikhara* simply means, to ask Allah to guide one to the right sort of action concerning a job or deed.
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