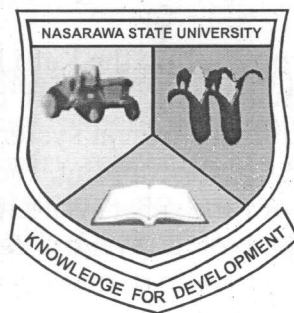




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A Historical Study of Medicinal Significance of Shea-Butter in Ilorin Emirate

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Introduction

Shea-butter is an off-white or ivory coloured fat extracted from the nut of the African shea tree (*Vitellaria Paradoxa*).¹ The English word shea comes from Si, the tree's name in the Bambara language of Mali. It is known by many local names, e.g. *karite* in Wolof language of Senegal, *Ori* in some parts of West Africa, and many others.²

The shea butter tree is indigenous to the African continent and sub-Saharan Africa in particular. Its global production thrives in West African countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Senegal, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, Namibia and Nigeria. In Nigeria, the Hausas call the shea tree *mankade*, the Ibos call it *okwuma*, and the Yorubas call it *Igi-emi*.³

Its historical significance was borne out of necessity and inevitability of man to explore its immediate environment to solve several natural and artificial problems that might have confronted him. In order for man to ensure the continuous existence of his race, tribe and nation on earth, early man had adopted his indigenous plant as a vast resource for food production due to its richness in vitamins A, E and F, shelter, clothing and most especially, medicine. Man therefore has a high dependency on plants which led to its incorporation into their various ways of maintaining survival and livelihood, including healthcare.⁴

Since the time immemorial, Africans have been acquainted with scientific knowledge of their flora environment. They were able to depict some of the isolated chemical constituents in shea butter as anti-inflammatory, emollient and humectant properties.⁵

Therefore it was widely used as a sunblocking lotion, and absorber of ultraviolet radiation. Since many years ago, Africans have been accustomed to the use of shea butter as medicine for the management of sinusitis and relief of nasal congestion.⁶ Similarly, they have used shea butter to heal bruising, dermatitis and all forms of massage therapy.⁷

Shea butter's care and healing properties were harnessed thousands of years ago in Africa. This attests to the fact that, no society exists without its own art of healing. It had been realized early by Africans that they lived near the equator where the sun rays are intense and the skin needs all the helps it can get to protect it. Shea butter had been realized early enough by Africans to have contained cinnamic acid and as a moisturizer that provided protection and healing to the skin in this regard.⁸ It would therefore be erroneous to claim and assume that, the first scientific description of shea butter was done by the British explorer Mungo Park in 1795. The history of shea butter usage, scientific depiction and medicinal significance goes further than that.⁹ The history of the precious commodity can

be traced back to ancient African history, where it was used to protect the hair and skin in the fierce sun and hot dry winds of African deserts and savannah.¹⁰ The Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta had already observed regional trade of shea butter across West Africa in the fourteenth century. It was centuries later, that the Scottish explorer Mungo Park noted the great medicinal importance of shea butter.¹¹

The objective of this study therefore, is the historical examination of the medicinal significance of shea butter to the inhabitants of Ilorin. As one of the major producers of the shea butter in Nigeria, the research analysed the impact of shea butter in healing, medications and healthcare in Ilorin since the 19th century. In this, the activities of several kinds of traditional healthcare providers were historically examined.

Historical and Medicinal Value of Shea Butter in Ilorin

Shea butter trees have been found and produced in commercial quantity in several parts of Ilorin and her outlying communities since time immemorial. Its economic advantage was based on the fact that, it produces nuts for up to 200 years.¹² Communities like Alapa, Mandala, Gudu, Idiape, Apado, Iponrin, Maranfinpepele, Alalubosa, Famole-Olohunsogo, Ajelende, Kure-Oja, Laduba, Ogbondoroko, Ariyibi, Sosoki, Alajagusi, Yeregi, Gaa Papka and many others can be described as the hub of shea butter in Ilorin Emirate. Shea butter tree usually grow to an average of about 15m long with profuse branches and thick waxy and deeply fissured bark that makes it fire resistant.¹³ History indicated that, the security importance, fire resistant nature and medicinal value of shea butter tree was effectively utilized, which made it extensively cultivated throughout Ilorin emirate. Shea butter tree was so rampant in Ilorin and its environs to the extent that, it was used as wall or shield to protect Ilorin against the attacks of her enemies in the early 19th century fratricidal wars.¹⁴

Economic and medicinal value of Ilorin shea butter was enormous to the extent that, the colonial government invested and profited impressively in it.¹⁵ The Ilorin shea butter the people of Ilorin, imagining that all white men are merchants, at first got it into their head that we had come to their capital to make commercial treaty and to open industry had since the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period added value and strength to the economic history of the emirate. During these periods, shea butter attracted the Europeans, and other distant African as well as Nigerian traders to participate in Ilorin economy.¹⁶ In order to have free movement access to Ilorin shea butter trade, the Emir and chiefs were adequately provided with gifts. In 1889 for instance, £150 worth of gifts were presented to the Emir and chiefs to guarantee their political access to permission to trade.¹⁷ The presents were presumably regarded as an introductory payment for the opening of this trade. According to A. F. Mockler-Ferryman,

*the people of Ilorin, imagining that all white men are merchants, at first got it to their heads that we had come to their capital to make a commercial treaty and to open a large business for the purchase of shea butter.*¹⁸

The industry generated revenue, employment and wealth to the emirate. For instance in 1950, a shea butter producer earned 5 pounds 10 shillings per month.¹⁹ Shea butter sellers like Alhaja Toyin Saadu, Alhaja Mero, and Alhaja Memunat from Gaa Papka in Moro L.G.A were all from wealthy and upper class of the Ilorin emirate community.²⁰

To many indigenous care users in Ilorin, traditional medicine is not adopted as an alternative, but rather as a preferred method even when orthodox care is available.²¹ For this reason, the health of an average indigenous person depends on his flora environment than the service of the orthodox physician located at a substantial geometrical separation from him.²² Historically therefore, shea butter tree also known as *igi emi* as one of the flora specie, was been relied upon by the people of Ilorin to proffer solution to health challenges. It was heavily relied on as a natural medicine and ointment used in two major ways. The first method was the common undiluted raw shea butter, and secondly, by mixing with other herbal components.

The use of undiluted shea butter was widespread and common among households. It was categorized as a conventional medicinal component throughout Ilorin and its environs, and other African communities. Before the introduction of foreign after-bathe body ointments by Europeans, shea butter was widely and commonly used as body cream and ointment. It was believed to be capable of softening the skin. It was commonly used to cure simple body or skin diseases like swelling and chicken pox, because, it easily forces out pox from the skin.

Many times, it was referred to as body pain killer also known as *Ero*. It was practically acknowledged to have cured and brought comfort to painful parts of the body. Brian Greenwood gave a vast account of Mungo Park's findings on how shea butter was applied to cure wounds during his exploration of the Niger in the 19th century.²³ In the views of Makeish,

*Some of the historical background of the shea nut tree and shea butter includes the control of dandruff, lessen scanty and keloids, as a nasal decongestant and as an ingredient in many home-made (and mass produced) soaps, ointments, and cream. It helps the skin to retain its natural oils and can stimulate collagen production.*²⁴

Moreover, in the pre-colonial and colonial periods in Ilorin, undiluted shea butter was commonly used as sex lubricant for new couples, in order to aid smooth sexual intercourse of the virgin bride. In this, shea butter was being added to the virginal of the bride.²⁵ The moment the male counterpart is able to penetrate his organ to the wife's vagina, the shea butter helps to enhance an easy breakage of the virginity, and such a wife became easily disvirgined. The application of shea butter to the wife's virginamakes her to feel little or no pain during her first sexual intercourse.²⁶

The second major medicinal aspect of shea butter was by mixing it with other herbal components. This application and procedure was very common among the professional traditional healthcare providers. In this second aspect, the professionals use shea butter as a preservator of the other herbal components, so as to ensure durability. Similarly, shea butter had been widely adopted, because it was believed to be a boost and an enhancer of medicinal strength ability and power of the other herbal components. Historically, the traditional professional healthcare providers in Ilorin had manipulated as well as exploited the medicinal qualities and features of shea butter in a number of ways.

Traditional Bonesetters

There were hundreds of traditional bonesetters in Ilorin and its environs, and their past success, value and records have made them a reliable point of call to victims of bone deformities within and outside Ilorin. The traditional bonesetters in Ilorin and its environs made use of shea butter in treating several bone and skin deformities. Bonesetters at Ogala in Dada quarter of Okelele, Wopa Compound at Agbaji quarters, Okesuna quarters, Ogala at Yeregi village, Oke-Oyi, and several other parts of the Emirate, have existed since the establishment of the Emirate traditional political system in the 19th century. Historical evidence shows that, shea butter served as one of the basic medicinal components that had contributed to their success story in fixing and healing bone deformities within and afar.

Oral evidence revealed that, since the 19th century, the bonesetters adopted shea butter also known as *Ori*, to be mixed together with *peperomia pellucida* leave also known as *ewe rerinkomi* and other herbal elements like *agarantum conyzoides* also known as *imi esu*, to massage and set bones.²⁷ Before the 1990s, shea butter was used by bonesetters to treat open wounds. However, many cases of germ like complications like gangrene and tetanus had encouraged and stimulated collaboration between the orthodox and traditional bone setters. As from the 1990s, patients were thereby encouraged by the bonesetters to treat open wounds with more powerful antibiotics in the orthodox hospitals, after which they will have to return back to the bonesetters for further treatment procedures.

The bonesetters initially identify fracture sites and areas with palpation.²⁸ However, their collaboration with orthodoxy in the 21st century stimulated the use of modern radiological examination to identify fracture site.²⁹ Once identified and reduced to its possible anatomical positions, the bonesetters relied heavily on shea butter mixed together with *peperomia pellucida* leave also known as *ewe rerinkomi* and other herbal element like *agarantum conyzoides* also known as *imi esu* to apply, massage, fix and operate the bone back to its former or normal status.³⁰ The efficacy of the medicinal status of shea butter to the bonesetters was described as an invisible bone operator or fixer.³¹

Embalment follows, as the affected limb is splinted with clothes, plywood and bandage to forestall immobility. During the immobility period of mostly 50 to 60 days, the splinting materials are changed every four and five days, by which the bonesetter reapplies and massage with the shea butter herbal mixture.³² Shea butter herbal mixtures were acknowledged to have aided rapid and quick bone recovery and healing. These reasons have over the past accorded the traditional bonesetting method an edge over the modern orthodox treatment. For instance, treatments in the modern hospitals took place between three to six months, contrary to the treatments at the traditional bonesetting clinic which was as low as fifty to sixty days.³³

Muslim Scholars, Medicine and Herbal Practitioners

The significant feature of the Islamic scholarship, medicine and charms of the 19th century was that, it serves as a means of power, security and an appreciable means of earning a living. The might and strength of Islamic scholarship and medicine facilitated the spread of Islam to the extent that it became the religion of the State.

Since the 19th century, many Ilorin Muslim scholars based their medicinal practices on the teachings and evidences from the holy book (Quran) and the teachings of the holy prophet Mohammed (Hadith). They realized early that, the holy Quran clearly compels man to make use of scientific authority to discover the secret of the universe, and tame the nature for the benefit of mankind.³⁴ They counted on the Quran 5, verse 87 which says, "Do not prohibit what is made lawful by Allah", and had adopted those lawful and permitted (Halal) plants and herbal components from their flora environment to produce medicines.³⁵ The Ilorin Muslims scholars' belief in herbs relied on the prophetic tradition narrated by Abu Shaybah that, "it is among the miracles of plants and trees that they could be mixed-up, cooked and later given to the sick people which will heal them by the power of Allah".³⁶ Similarly, they have been using plants for medicine based on prophetic evidences narrated by Bukhari and Abu Dawud that "the prophet says that whoever takes seven seeds of olive oil known as *Ajwa* will be protected from poison and spiritual attack for that day".³⁷

They have been making use of natural resources like stones, roots, water and many others due to evidences and testimonies from the prophetic tradition narrated by Al-Bukhari that,

*When the prophet was observing prayer, a scorpion stung his hand and he quickly left the place and cursed the scorpion by saying "you are cursed because, you did not even abstain from any prophet". Then he requested for a bowl of water and mixed it with salt to apply on the hand, and he later recited Suratul Al-Iklas, Al-Falaq and Al-Nas, which signifies relief and protection of Allah.*³⁸

Moreover, Ilorin Muslim scholars had since the 19th century been mixing Quranic texts portion with shea butter and other herbal components to cure several kinds of ailments.³⁹ The ancient and contemporary Ilorin Muslim scholars believed strongly in the inclusion of Allah's name, Quranic prayers and texts in form of potion mixed with some other plants and herbal elements like shea butter in making several kinds of medicines. They have strong confidence in the effectiveness of preparing their medicine with the mixture of Islamic potion. They relied on the use of Quranic potion as medicine based on proofs from several renowned Islamic scholars of repute. Ibn Taymiyyah in his manuscript titled "Majmuu Al-Fatawah, Ibn Qoyyim in his book "Saadul Ma'ad" and Ibn Baz in his "Fatawah Ibn Baz" all proved in favour of the use of potion as medicine, or to mix with other Islamic permitted plants or animal parts as medicine.⁴⁰

The heterogeneous status of Ilorin had a profound effect on the activities and practices of the Muslim scholars, preachers, medicines and charm makers since the 19th century. There was an adoption and mixture of ingredients and techniques from the local plants and herbs which was also common in the Yoruba traditional medicine and charms. Shea butter and some other indigenous plants have therefore been adopted and mixed with some other Islamic medicinal components to heal and cure those in need, and solve some societal problems.

In Ilorin, it was a common practice among the Muslim scholars, charms and medicine practitioners to combine shea butter with dried and grounded *Abrus Canescens* leaves also known as *Ewe Omisinmisin*, *Spondins Mombin* leave also known as *Ewe Iyeye*, honey and potions made from Quranic verses, to cure the problem of unclear voice of Islamic

preachers and their subordinates refers to as *Ajanasi*.⁴¹ Similarly, shea butter was mixed with a traditional medicinal seedling *Eugenia aromatic* known as *Kanafuru* in Yoruba, dried and grounded *Basilocin* leave known as *Ewe Efirin* and Quranic verse 5: V67 potion to cure ulcer, dysentery and some other diseases.⁴²

Since the early 19th century period of incessant crises in Ilorin, the scholars had adopted all sorts of means to seek for protection against enemies. They mixed *Parquetinu nigreseens* leave also as *Ewe Ogbo*, African nut tree, and Quranic potion in Q5:V67 Suratul Moidha, any kind of soap, and shea butter.⁴³ It was meant for bathing and seeking for Allah's protection on daily basis.

Similarly, the Muslim scholars cured infectious diseases like measles, using the mixture of burnt *peperomia pellucida* leave also called *Ewe rere* and *Aframomum melegueta* also refers to as *Ataare* and potion derived from the inscription "There is no God except Allah" written in one hundred and eleven times.⁴⁴ All were mixed with shea butter and used to rub the body on constant basis to cure measles.⁴⁵ The efficacy of the method accorded the Muslim scholars higher patronage of measles patients.

Islamic charm makers and spiritualists also combined shea butter with some Quranic verses potions and some herbal components to cure people that took poisons. This was known as pain relief refers to as *Ero* among the Yorubas.⁴⁶ It was used to cure poisonous intake in the real physical life, and those consumed through dreams or sequences of mental images through sleep.⁴⁷

Herbalists (*Babalawo*) and Traditional Birth Attendants

The herbalists and traditional birth attendants are among the oldest specialists of indigenous medical practices not only in Ilorin, but also in other parts of the Yoruba land. Shea butter serves as one of their common medicinal ingredient used to treat several ailments in infants and adult folk. They made use of shea butter combined with some other herbal formula to produce medicine in three different ways, namely, to form cream or ointments, as concoction also known as *Aseje*, and produced as soap.⁴⁸

The herbalists and traditional birth attendants habitually combine shea butter with well-grounded fresh *Peperomia Pellucida* leave known as *Ewe Riri* to cream and ointment to cure measles commonly known among the Yorubas as *Igbona* in infants and adults.⁴⁹ Scientifically, the indigenous care givers believed that since *Peperomia Pellucida* plant grow on the wet area of land, and also contains a lot of water in it, it should serve and thrive as an effective medicine to suppress high temperature.⁵⁰ Some portion of this medicine are always used to rub the body, while a very few quantity is added to hot pap for consumption.

Some traditional and indigenous care givers also refer to measles in infants. In this, a common and popular local cream and ointment extracted from coconut known as *Ananas Comosus* or *Adiagbon* combined with shea butter were used to rub the child's body, while little portion would be consumed to cure infant measles.⁵¹

Before the 1980s when modern health facilities and medicine was scarce in Ilorin and its environs, the traditional care givers have cured many patients both infant and adult suffering from measles, which was a common disease at this period of time.⁵² It was very

common for some infant patients to live and reside in the custody or vicinity of the elderly relatives and guardians who are knowledgeable in the measles infant treatment techniques. In most cases, such children stayed and grew up under the care of such relatives, guardians and care givers.⁵³

Even since the 1980s when modern health facilities became widespread in Ilorin, the traditional care givers' treatment still remained the dominant cure for measles in infants. According to some oral evidences, most patients during this period became highly resistance to the modern anti biotic and treatment procedures from the orthodox health facilities.⁵⁴ Most of the patients of infant measles recorded and treated by the traditional care givers during this period had previously undergone series of medication from the orthodox health centres.⁵⁵ It thereby became a common knowledge and awareness that, herbal treatment was the best cure for measles in infants and adults.

Moreover, shea butter medicinal significance attests to the fact that, African traditional medicinal knowledge was liable to change, so as to be able to withstand the test of time. Its significances discerns between the old medicine procedure as social arts, and the new and contemporary traditional scientific medical practices. For instance before the 1990s, chronic or whooping cough known in Yoruba as *Iko Igbona* or *Iko Jefunjefun* was being cured using the manual hand to maneuver and mix the dried grounded *Bryophyllum Pinnatum* leave known as *Ewe Abamoda*, palm oil or *Elacis Guineensis* known as *Epo Pupa* and shea butter.⁵⁶ As from the 1990s however, the production techniques of this medicine changed with the use of heat from the sun to smelting the shea butter with palm oil and other herbal component, so as to ensure proper absorption, blending and effectiveness of the medicine.⁵⁷

Similarly, in the past, cooking of herbal contents as concoction was very common among the traditional herbal care givers. In the contemporary period however, most herbalists prefers to pound their herbal contents with mortar before mixing with shea butter. This was borne out of the need to preserve and sustain the chemical efficiency and value of the medicine. It was experimented and observed that, the heat from hot fire must have reduced the chemical content, while grounding and pounding of the ingredients did not only preserves and empowers the chemicals content, but also and increases the effectiveness of the medicine.⁵⁸

Moreover, in the past, liquid content of local egg and cow bone marrow were used as menthol to add up to shea butter, to cure and initiate relief from body pain. In the contemporary period, herbalists have adopted the use of modern *confo* and *canfra* combined with shea butter to enhance instant relief and cure from pain.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Ilorin and its environs is been endowed with rich flora environment, and had in the past been explored in several ways, including to produce medicines. Shea butter and other herbal components secured from Ilorin community, had since the 19th century been espoused as medicine by several categories of traditional care givers, to cure several kinds of ailment. The efficacy and uniqueness of shea butter had since the past made it widely adopted and mixed with other herbal components to prepare medicine. Moreover, shea butter had ensured sustainability, and safeguarded the historical value and status of

African traditional medicine. Shea butter medicinal value in Ilorin and other Nigerian communities had support the traditional medical technique to be able to stand the test of time, and competed favourable with the orthodox method.

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- ⁴⁶ Oral interview with Alh. Sheikh Saadlahi Salaudeen Alagbo, an Islamic cleric, b. 1920.
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- ⁴⁸ Oral interview with Mallam Saliu Alaaya.