



INDIGENOUS ORTHOPAEDICS SYSTEM AMONG THE JUKUN OF WUKARI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, TARABA STATE

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature and practice of indigenous orthopedics system among the Jukun in Wukari Local Government Area. Pre-colonial Africans were highly innovative, inventive and development conscious, and this is confirmed by their ability to independently use herbs, roots, bark of trees, animals, soil and medical ideas or techniques in healing or solving medical problems. Wukari has been one of the areas or places in northern Nigeria where man was able to engage in ethno-medical doctoring. The paper, however, assesses the practice of indigenous or traditional orthopedics system among the Jukun. It establishes that traditional orthopedics system plays important roles in health care delivery. However, some factors like dearth of practitioners, loss of interest by the young ones, Christian beliefs and teaching, urbanization, and deforestation have been factors militating against the effective practice of traditional orthopedic system among the Jukun in Wukari Local Government Area. Methodologically, both primary and secondary sources of historical data were adopted. The paper concludes by asserting that enormous potentials and opportunities exist in the traditional orthopedics system among the Jukun as a veritable tool for health care delivery.

Keywords:

Indigenous orthopedics, herbs, practitioners, bone setting, healing.

Introduction:

The use of traditional medicine as a source of healing is not strange among the Jukun in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State. From time immemorial, the people have used traditional medicine as the first port of call in terms of healthcare or when there is the challenge of illness. Majority of the elders in the community possess a good knowledge of plants that cure certain illnesses. As a matter of fact, traditional medicine remains a viable alternative to orthodox health care delivery among the Jukun. For centuries, traditional medicine has played a vital role in addressing the health needs of the Jukun from herbal remedies to spiritual healing practices; traditional medicine has provided holistic care, addressing the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of the people.

Traditional medicine is important to the Jukun because it provides accessible health care, is deeply rooted in their culture, and offers a comprehensive approach to health. Traditional health

practitioners are often respected community leaders, providing guidance and support beyond physical health.¹ Among the Jukun, there is a strong belief in, and dread of evil and malevolent men and women who are credited with supernatural powers that enable them to wreck havoc on their enemies and innocent folks alike. Therefore, in dealing with health issues, it is not merely dealing with individual complaints, because health is a finely balanced and finely tuned relationship among forces, the least significant of which may be the material or physical. Supporting this position Apenda and Adega stated that for Africans, health is essential to life as a signal. Health, according to them, is about wholesomeness and maintenance of the balance in existence; balance in the cosmic order in the relationships between humans and other inhabitants of the psychic environment a balance in the social and human relationships with the supernatural.²

From the fore going, it becomes clear that health has essentially psychic, social and religious dimensions, and traditional healthcare practices seek to nurture, preserve, restore and enhance wholeness. It is often said that health is an antidote to brokenness and medicine is the agency. Ritual agents, therefore, diagnose, prescribe and apply medicine to fight different kinds of brokenness.³

Indigenous Orthopedics in Wukari:

The Jukun in Wukari practice different kinds of traditional medicine. Traditional orthopedics is one of the medical areas in which the Jukun have demonstrated expertise over the years. Traditional orthopedics among the Jukun in Wukari is the science of healing fractures and other related bone injuries with the application of animal fats, herbs and spiritual powers.⁴ The idea of treating fractures among the Jukun is as old as the people. Agya, while responding to questions stated that the knowledge of setting or repairing broken bones has been age long among the Jukun. He went on to say that their ancestors handed over this science to them from well over 1000 years ago. He stated further that before the arrival of the Whiteman in Wukari, his great grandparents used to repair fractures using stocks of guinea corn or millet tied together.⁵ As a matter of fact, this method is still in use in Wukari.

Traditional method of handling orthopedic problems in Wukari has been commended and attained a level of success that has proved more efficacious than orthodox medicine. As pointed out by Olaoye and Echa in the case of the Igala, there have been cases of fractures in Wukari resulting from auto crashes, falls from trees or slips. Wounds and injuries from such fractures are usually cleaned and treated. The traditional orthopedist that is skillful in the knowledge of bone setting ensures fractured bones are united and healed properly to prevent deformity.⁶ Indigenous orthopedists in Wukari have successfully handled difficult cases which would have led to amputation. This expertise makes amputation a rare occurrence in the area. It is on record that many complicated orthopedic cases at the Wukari General Hospital, Federal Medical Centre

¹ G.M. Cynthia, "A History of Traditional Medicine Among the Kunav People of Southern Tivland, From 1999-2022", B.A Project, Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Federal University Wukari, march 2025, P.26

² A.Z. Apenda and A.P. Adega, "Constraints and Challenges in Traditional Health Care in Nigeria... P.358

³ R.A. Olaoye and A. Echa, "Orthopedics in the Traditional Medical System of Igala land", in O. Akinwumi, O.O. Okpoh, C.B.N. Ogbogbo and A. Onoja, African Indigenous Science and Knowledge System... P.368

⁴ Interview; Agya Agbutsokwa, 78, Traditional Medicine Practitioner, 15th January, 2025 interviewed in Wukari.

⁵ R.A. Olaoye and A. Echa, "Orthopedics in the Traditional Medical System of Igalaland" ... P.371

Jalingo and Specialist Hospital Jalingo were most often referred to the traditional orthopedists in Wukari. Surprisingly, such cases were well attended to by the traditional orthopedists, and the patients were healed.

Traditional orthopedists in Wukari are considered to have enormous powers and control over witch- craft as some of them are reputed to have some supernatural powers which enable them to detect if their clients' cases were ordinary or manipulated by certain unseen powers since some of the fractures are believed to be caused mainly by magic, witchcraft or sorcery. Against this background, Vosiki Ali Udimikpan stated that, as a traditional orthopedist, he prepares himself with some supernatural powers which help him to determine what has been the cause of his patient's problem and what herbs will be used to heal the patient.⁷

Training:

Traditional orthopedists receive their training and expertise over a long period of apprenticeship.⁸ Most of the respondents informed the researcher that they had their training within the family. The idea of repairing broken bones among the Jukun of Wukari is transferred from one family member to another. To support this view, Salihu Ibrahim Sangari stated that he acquired the knowledge of bone setting from his father. He went on to say that his father got the knowledge from his grandfather. He further stated that non-family members are not taught the wisdom of repairing broken bones because it is a family guild.⁹ Genesis J. Agbu averred that the knowledge of healing fractures is passed from the ancestors to family members. He then told the researcher that he got the knowledge of bone - setting from his father. He stated further that there are different families in Wukari which are involved in the science of setting or repairing of bones and so, their methods of treatment differ from one healer to another. He pointed out that acquisition of the healing knowledge depends largely on the method of treatment; if the method of treatment is simple, the apprentice learns faster. However, difficult methods which involve the use of spiritual powers take longer periods for the apprentice to acquire the knowledge.¹⁰ Bujujen Ladan stated that the knowledge of healing fractures is obtained by heredity. His great grandfather got the knowledge from his ancestors in a dream and then passed it to his son (Bujujen's father) who also passed it to him. Their family has been reputable for setting of bones in which they have earned the title of *Ku'u ba Mbye khe* (the king of bone healers). He stated further that every child born into the family is a potential fracture healer. Also every male child in the family gives birth to a fracture healer. However, a female child who is endowed with the knowledge but gets married cannot give birth to a fracture healer because the transmission is paternal since the knowledge has been a family heritage through their father.¹¹

From the foregoing, it is worthy to note that training is fortuitous because there is no formal admission for training. An apprentice is always the relative of the master - healer. He learns from the master unknowingly by following him to the bush for the collection of herbs and by observing while assisting his master at work. Equally important, the job of bone setting is not

⁶ Interview, Vosiki Ali Udimikpan, 62, Traditional orthopedist, interviewed in Wukari on 15th January 2025.

⁷ R.A. Olaoye and A. Echa, "Orthopedics in the Traditional Medical System of Igalaland"... P.371

⁸ Interview, Salihu Ibrahim Sangari, 62, Traditional Orthopedist, Interviewed in Wukari on 25th April, 2024.

⁹ Interview, Genesis J. Agbu, 51, Traditional Orthopedist, Interviewed in Wukari on 10th May, 2024.

¹⁰ Interview, Bujujen Ladan, 57, Traditional Orthopedist, interviewed in Wukari on 12th May, 2024.

the work of one person; the relative who doubles as apprentice assists in the treatment by holding down the patient and setting the fractured bone. As a matter of fact, he knows the process of preparing the medicine because he is already familiar with it by being with the master and running errands for him. This method of training is best described as learning through assistance.¹²

According to Addakenjo Adi, training can also be done by observation. As the master who might be the father or uncle or elder brother engages in the process of healing, he would invite the apprentice (who might be a son, nephew or younger brother) to come and watch the process from a close range. Besides, whenever the master leaves for the bush in order to fetch herbs, the apprentice would be asked to come along with him. In this way, the apprentice understands the knowledge and wisdom involved in the healing process. Having been familiar with the necessary herbs, the apprentice may be sent alone to the bush to fetch the herbs.¹³ It is important to note that there is no graduation from the training. No matter how knowledgeable the apprentice becomes, he will never be set free to start his own healing home. He continues to serve the master until the master dies. Then he takes over and becomes the new master.

Another aspect of training in fracture healing is *azo watsotso* (induction into the spirit world). The *azo watsotso* enables the apprentice to determine the cause of the fracture since the majority of the Jukun in Wukari believe that accidents or fractures can be caused by meta-physical or spiritual forces such as the divinities, ancestors, witches, wizards and sorcerers. Therefore, the apprentice needs to be spiritually built in order to understand the cause of the fracture which will help him to apply the right medicine.¹⁴ Against this background, his master takes him into a shrine where he sits on a stone naked. The master then washes his face with a concoction seven times. This is repeated for seven days. After the seventh day, the apprentice will mysteriously develop superhuman knowledge of understanding the cause of events and possible means of treatment.¹⁵

Process of Healing Fractures in Wukari:

Indigenous orthopedists in Wukari are blessed with the knowledge of repairing broken bones, as they have a good knowledge of herbs and roots that are orthopaedically potent. Against this background, T.A. Adihikon avers that indigenous orthopedists among the Jukun in Wukari are specialists or consultants who are not only knowledgeable in African cosmology but provide effective and efficient orthopaedic treatment that have saved many lives.¹⁶ There are several processes or methods of healing or repairing broken bones in Wukari. The popular method is the use of chicken for the treatment of orthopaedic cases. This method commences with the selection of the type of chicken to be used. When the appropriate chicken is obtained by the relations of the patient, the healer takes the chicken from them and offers prayers over the chicken to his ancestors. He raises the chicken up and says: “The knowledge and wisdom to repair broken bones

¹¹ R.A. Olaoye and A. Echa, “Orthopedics in the Traditional Medical System of Igalaland”... P. 372

¹² Interview, Addakenjo Adi, 65, Traditional Orthopedist, interviewed in Wukari on 12th may, 2024.

¹³ T.A. Adihikon, “A History of Primary Healthcare in Wukari Area of Taraba State, 1900-2015”, Ph.D Thesis, Department of History Benue State University, Makurdi, 2021. P. 127

¹⁴ T.A. Adihikon, “A History of Primary Healthcare in Wukari Area”... P. 127

¹⁵ T.A. Adihikon, “A History of Primary Healthcare in Wukari Area of Taraba State”... P.131

is given to me by you, my ancestors: Here is a chicken brought to you by your servant; accept it and heal him. If there is any evil that intends to infiltrate into the healing process, deal with such evil and let your servant be healed".¹⁷ After the prayer, the healer then slaughters the chicken, prepares it and carefully removes the fat of the chicken. It is worthy to note that it is the fat of the chicken that is used for the treatment. The chicken's fat will be melted and used to set the broken bone, and then a wrapped splint would be tied around the fractured part of the patient's body. Other healers use the fat of the cobra or manatee to set broken bones.

Apart from the usage of chicken, cobra or manatee fat to treat orthopaedic cases, the Jukun in Wukari also use roots and herbs. The following herbs and roots are used in the treatment of orthopaedic cases. They include *Ajasin*, *Avey*, *Ahinta*, *Apato* among others. These herbs and roots are believed to have medicinal potency that can heal broken bones. The *Ajasin* leaves and the roots of *Apato* along with shea-butter and other healing properties are pounded into a paste and applied to the fracture after which it is wrapped with splints made from the palm frond. The paste is preserved in a pottery container and frequently applied to the fracture after adding enough *beauta* (shear butter) to it. The application of the paste to the fracture is done during the bone - setting when the wrapped splints are been removed.¹⁸

In another development, the spiritual method is used in treating orthopaedic cases in Wukari. *Tsa'asen* stated that indigenous fracture healers in the process of treating fractures invoke unseen spirits for help, especially the spirits of their ancestors who probably endowed the knowledge of healing fractures upon them. As a matter of fact, the invocation contains the names of the ancestors who in the past practised traditional orthopaedics. Intermittently, they invoke their names asking for assistance from them in order to succeed in treating the broken bones.¹⁹

Traditional orthopaedists among the Jukun in Wukari are considered to have enormous power and control over any kind of fracture. Indeed, they are considered to have some supernatural powers endowed by the gods and goddesses. The primary function of the traditional orthopaedists is to set and heal broken bones which are believed to be caused mainly by scorcerers, witches and wizards through accidents. As noted earlier, the process of dealing with fractures involves a combination of physical and spiritual healing. The physical component of the healing involves the use of paste prepared from herbs, roots, juices, animal fat etc while the spiritual component involves the use of incantations, exorcism and ventriloquism which sometimes involve the sacrifice of animals.

It is worthy to point out that in the process of the healing, both the healers and patients observe some taboos or avoid certain foods. According to *Waubona Gani*, during the course of the healing, the healers and patients must avoid sexual intercourse. She stated further that on the day of setting the broken bone, it is prohibited for the healer to be involved in any act of sexual intercourse until after the broken bone is successfully set and all other forms of treatment accomplished. It is then he or she may engage in the act of sexual intercourse. However, the patient should completely avoid sexual intercourse throughout the period of treatment, until after

¹⁶ Interview, *Adda Gani*, 67, Traditional Orthopedist, interviewed in Wukari on 12th May, 2024

¹⁷ Interview, *Safiya Usenis*, 54, Traditional Orthopedist, interviewed in Wukari on 12th may, 2024. See also R.A. *Olaoye and A. Echa* "Orthopedics in Traditional Medical System of Igalaland"... P.374.

¹⁸ Interview, *Tsa'asen Aji*, 63, Traditional Medicine Practitioner, interviewed in Gindin-Dorowa on 16th may, 2024.

he or she is fully recovered.²⁰ It was revealed that sexual intercourse is regarded by the people as an act of impurity which affects the healing process. Therefore, its avoidance gives hope for fast healing, protection and security from malevolent or evil forces.²¹

If the fat of a chicken is used in the process of healing, the patient is strongly prohibited from breaking the bones of chickens served in any of his meals. If the patient either consciously or unconsciously breaks a chicken's bone while eating, it will affect the healing because the chicken's fat has been linked spiritually to that of the patient for the treatment. Therefore, the act of breaking a chicken's bone will affect the spiritual bond between the chicken and the patient. Consequently, the treatment becomes ineffective. Against this background, the patient is prohibited from eating chicken until after recovery.

Challenges:

Traditional orthopaedic practice among the Jukun in Wukari Local Government Area has witnessed intense challenges arising from agricultural activities, urbanization, and death of elderly practitioners among others. Therefore, this section is basically concerned with the multi-layered consequences of these aforementioned challenges and how they impinge on the practice of traditional orthopaedics in Wukari.

Agricultural Activities: Increase in agricultural activities in Wukari local Government Area has adversely affected the smooth practice of traditional orthopaedics in the area. Following the expansion of farms and other related agricultural activities by various agriculturists in the area, shrubs, trees, grasses etc are burnt in order to pave way for smooth agricultural activities. This practice has its negative impact on traditional orthopaedics since the shrubs, trees and grasses that produce the herbs, roots and barks required by the healers for their activities are either cut down or burnt by the farmers. Collaborating this fact, Penda and Adegga assert that felling of trees for the purpose of construction of large estates, bush burning in search of games or rodents, the use of firewood as energy source for cooking, brick burning, iron smelting and agricultural purposes are serious challenges. This affects traditional orthopaedics with its reliance on roots, shrubs, bushes, animal substances and barks of trees for the preparation of medicine. These authors further argued that the use of herbicides on large farms that cannot be weeded manually leads to the loss of some plants, as herbicides are chemical compounds that kill plants. Herbicides may either be selective, killing weeds and leaving desired plants unscathed or non-selective that is generally toxic to all plants.²² No doubt, for the Jukun, as serious farmers who cultivate different kinds of crop on large pieces of land, plants and shrubs get destroyed in their effort to clear the land in order to pave way for the sunshine on their crops.

Urbanization: Just like agriculture, the process of urbanization in Wukari has contributed immensely to the constraints witnessed in the practice of indigenous orthopaedics in the study area. Without doubt, the construction of new estates, new institutions, new houses and the building of new roads have grasses, shrubs, trees etc destroyed in the process of clearing plots for

¹⁹ Interview, Waubona Gani, 61, Traditional Orthopedist, interviewed in Wukari on 11th May, 2024.

²⁰ Interview, Atagondo Agyo, 66, Farmer, interviewed in Bye-pyi on 26th April, 2024.

²¹ A.Z. Apenda and A.P. Adegga "Constraints and challenges in Traditional Health Care in Nigeria. The Tiv Perspective..." P. 361.

the construction works. Nwukai Adimani stated that the establishment of the Federal University Wukari which led to the development of private students' hostels and private estates to accommodate the members of staff of the institution, led to the destruction of plants and shrubs. He went on to say that the location of the institution used to be where they normally went to fetch herbs, roots and barks of trees for medicine.²³ With the urbanization of Wukari, it is becoming very difficult to get these medicinal plants.

Death of Elderly Indigenous Orthopaedics Practitioners: The death of elderly practitioners poses a great challenge to the practice of indigenous orthopaedics in Wukari. The gradual extinction of indigenous orthopedic practice in Wukari may advance from the fact that individuals, usually, elders in Wukari who are the repository of traditional orthopedic knowledge are dead. This knowledge is passed down by word of mouth to the trainees who may be family members or family friends. However, if this knowledge is not passed down, it is surely lost with the death of such a person.²⁴ Related to the above is that Jukun youths are less concerned with the practice of traditional orthopedics system in Wukari. As a matter of fact, their lack of interest in this medical system appears dangerous since the elders who possess the knowledge of herbal recipes have no one to bequeath that which was inherited from their ancestors.²⁵ Consequently, the elders die with their knowledge.

In order to checkmate the impact and consequences of the aforementioned challenges on the practice of indigenous orthopedics system in Wukari, it is imperative to identify possible measures that can prevent and control such challenges. First and foremost, there is need for a proper documentation of indigenous knowledge relating to health - care practices and medicine used by the traditional orthopedic practitioners in Wukari. This is due to the fact that most of the knowledge is in oral form which can be lost as a result of human memory deficiency and mortality, if not recorded or documented.²⁶ Against this background, there is obviously an urgent need to reawaken in most scholars the need to preserve, and research into the indigenous orthopedics practice. While that is obviously a step in the right direction, it is the submission of this paper that a more enduring impact can only be achieved through the inclusion of indigenous orthopedics practice among the Jukun of Wukari as a core aspect of the curriculum of the following universities located in the study area: Federal University Wukari, Kwararafa University Wukari and Taraba State University, Jalingo.²⁷

Furthermore, the Forest Reserve Policy should be re-introduced and revitalized in Nigeria especially in the study area in order to meet up with the new realities of the more pressing needs for protecting and securing medicinal plants that will support the smooth practice of indigenous orthopedics and alternative (traditional) medicine. This will check the excessive bush burning in search of games. Besides, more shrubs, grasses, trees and other medicinal plants for preparation of medicine should be obtained without stress by the practitioners. This can only be possible if

²² Interview, Nwukai Adimani, 57, Traditional Medicine Practitioners, interviewed in Wukari on 12th May, 2024.

²³ I.R. Tosho and Y.O. Isaac, "Reflections on Traditional Health Care Services in Ilorin Emirate", in O.E. Lemuel, P.I. Akanmidu and A. Danladi (Eds), *History of Indigenous Science, Technology and Economic Transformation in Africa Essays in Honour of Professor Raimi A. Olaoye*, Nigeria: Excellent Press Services Limited, 2022 P.375.

²⁴ A.Z. Apenda and A.P. Atega Constraints and Challenges in Traditional Healthcare... P.362.

²⁵ I.R. Tosho and Y.O. Isaac, "Reflections on Traditional Health Care Services in Ilorin Emirate..." P.374

²⁶ V. Iyanya, "Indigenous Knowledge System: A Panacea for Nigerian National Development," in R.A. Olaoye (ed) *History of Indigenous Science and Technology in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Crest hill Publishers Limited 2009, P.297.

necessary measures are taken to checkmate the destruction of our forests and bushes, particularly through bush burning.

Conclusion:

Indigenous orthopedics practice in Wukari is deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs and values of the people. This medical system emphasizes the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual healing processes. The system in Wukari involves the entire family of the healer. Parents share their knowledge, and the children learn through apprenticeship. This family approach ensures continuity and preserves the knowledge. From the discussion in this paper, it is clear that in Wukari, fractures do not happen in a vacuum. It is strongly believed among the Jukun that fractures in whatever form come as a result of metaphysical causes or forces which could be mainly due to witchcraft, hypnotism, sorcery among others. For the treatment, the use of animals such as chicken, cobra, and herbs etc, more so, incantation and divination are employed. At the end of the discussion, it has become imminent that the various challenges to the practice of indigenous orthopedics in Wukari may be daunting, but they are not insurmountable. All that is required in the view of this paper, is, therefore a little more political will on the part of the leaders in order for this important medical system to be sustained. This option is considered most realistic since it is believed that documentation, research and re-introduction of the forest reserve policy without a strong political will (as back – up) can hardly survive.