

Herbs as Food and Medicine in the Old Testament: Implications among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Herbs ('eseb' in Hebrew) simply mean vegetables, seeds, nuts, fruits, green grasses and all plant parts. In the Old Testament/ancient Israel, herbs were used mostly as normal foods and occasionally as medicine and therefore they enjoyed and still enjoy optimum health. In fact, Israel is described as the world healthiest nation. In South Eastern Igbo land, herbs are conceived as a typology of indigenous medicine and this is a fact but that they can be used as normal foods that can provide good nourishment and health is not generally understood. It is this problem of misconception resulting in the under- utilization of herbal foods for improved health that this research attempts to proffer solution for. Secondary sources for data collection were used and the data was historically analysed. Results of analysis are as follows: herbal food was divinely endowed to man for his optimal well-being; herbal food served as foods and traditional medicine in the Old Testament times; herbs are used to treat diverse ailments but many are doubtful of its safety because of the complexities associated with it. Herbs should be understood as normal food that is also therapeutic. It is recommended in this study that the contemporary Igbo people of the South East embrace the use of herbs for Primary Health- care and total well- being.

Keywords: Herbs, Herbal medicine, Herbal food, Old Testament, Israel.

Introduction

God designed herbs to be complete food for humanity both for the people of ancient Israel and for contemporary Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria. A lot of medicinal properties are deposited in the herbs that are in our neighbourhood. These herbs are simply the vegetables we consume on a daily basis but these vegetables unknown to us serve therapeutic purposes.

Outside the Old Testament, Nwankwo (2014) describes herbs as the oldest form of medicine ever known to man. For him, they are original, natural and an integral aspect of African and Igbo traditional religion and healing practice. Historical origin of herbal medicine can be traced back to Otzi in whose personal effects were found some medicinal herbs. Otzi's body was frozen in Otztal Alps for more than 5,300 years. In the tomb of the Neanderthal man was also found several plants suggesting therapeutic use of plants and

this dates back more than 6000 years (Solecki cited in Falodun and Imieje 2013). The origin of herbs therefore can be dated over 5000 years back. The first herbal history was written in 2800BC, the Pen T'sao by Shennong also known as the Divine farmer. Later in 400Bc, Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine wrote the first medicine record in Greek. The Greek and Roman medical practices are preserved in his writings (Nwankwo 2014).

The Old Testament which is represented in thirty-nine books that make up the entire Bible describes a historical people, namely the biblical Israel. In the Old Testament is found the most authentic record of the ancient Israelites. They are God's covenant people who were selected from all the nations of the world and God related with them through covenant and laws. They used and still use herbs both as food and also as natural therapies for the elimination of an array of diseases. For them, there is no clear demarcation between herbal food and herbal medicine. Little wonder Israel is rated as having one of the world's healthiest foods which are fruit and vegetables/herbs (Steinberg 2016). For the Israelites, herbal medicine was not dispensed exclusively by specially trained sacred persons/herbalists. People made use of herbs/ fruits and vegetables as occasion demanded. The nexus between herbal food and herbal medicine was reiterated by Hippocrates cited in Gorski (2015) who says 'Let food be thy medicine and medicine, thy food'. For the Igbo, herbal usage is entirely different from it uses in ancient Israel. This is because in Igbo worldview, traditional medicine is part and parcel of their religion and worship and has to do with gods/spirits. It is usually the sacred personages that rightfully dispense the medicine/ *ogwu* to sick people. The sacred persons are priests, diviners or medicine men who are believed to have deep intimacy with *agwu*, the chief patron deity of medicine. This has therefore created a big problem for persons who may like to harness the use of herbs for healing.

Currently in South Eastern Igboland contemporary experience shows that disease infestations have been on the increase and the more worrisome issue is that some ailments in modern times defy orthodox medication. There is a severe hunger and scarcity of money. A lot are not feeding well and many cannot afford hospital bills so there is need to look for alternative means of tackling diseases and staying healthy. Using herbs as food would have helped the Igbo of the South East but this is not properly appropriated hence the continued problem. It is this problem of under-utilization of herbs resulting in persistence of diseases that this research proposes to proffer solutions for. To achieve this, the paper would discuss in brief the people of South Eastern Igboland; examine herbal usages in ancient Israel ; the implications of herbal food usage in South Eastern Igboland .

Igbo of the South Eastern Nigeria

History has it that the Igbo people are a group of people who are believed to originate from Nri, a cultural group that shares a strong religious and cultural ideology with the Igbo in general. In fact, it is impossible to isolate what derives from Nri culture from what derives from other Igbo cultures. Nri people are known as both the progenitors and the priests of the whole Igbo race and as such they are high priests and king makers. Duhaze in Onwuejeogwu (1981) acknowledges that they take precedence of the other fraternities, priestly and social activities. The Igbo live in patrilineages called *Umunna*. Patrilineages grow to form villages and groups of villages form towns known as Obodo. The Igbo culture area covers the settlements of Agbor, Kwalla (west Niger), Diobu, Umuabayi (Port Harcourt), Arochukwu, Afikpo, Isiagu (Abakaliki Area), Enugu Ezike, (Nsukka Area) and Ebu- West (Niger Igbo) (Onwuejeogwu 1981). Even though Onwuejeogwu (2000) holds firmly to the fact that Igbo origin is traceable to Nri Kingdom and claims that this is the only argument that has oral tradition back up, many studies on Igbo origin have been embarked upon since this observation was made. Acholonu (2009) in her speech during a book presentation *They Lived before Adam-Prehistoric Origins of the Igbo: Never Been Ruled*, glaringly and convincingly gave the historical origin of the Igbo people. Her report emerged from a research of over twenty years and scientific discoveries. Acholonu's research reveals that the Igbo are the oldest single group of people on planet earth. To confirm her claims about Igbo people's early presence on earth, she states that the Yoruba god Obatanla has the inscription of the "Father of the Igbo nation" and this god is revered in Yorubaland. Acholonu's study being a later contribution is an improvement on earlier submissions on this topic and is upheld in this research work. Onunwa (2005) adds that the Igbo people share a common boundary with Edo state in the West, Ijaw and Kalabari in the South, the Idoma and Igala in the Northwest, Tiv and Ogoja in the North. They are therefore found in Rivers, Delta and part of Akwa Ibom states. The people so discussed here are the occupants of South Eastern Nigeria who have a total land area of about 15000sq miles about 41000kms. Their spoken language is generally Igbo language and a wide range of dialects. Igbo people are migrants to the core that is why they are found in many parts of the world.

Igbo people are known for their strong religious inclinations. They have diverse religious beliefs. There are traditional religious adherents and these believe in the Supreme being/*Chukwu* who is the overall and the lesser deities that serve as intermediaries to the supreme god. The idea of the presence of spirits looms large in Igbo daily experience. This philosophy tends to influence their lifestyle and the consciousness of God's presence hence the Igbo says Chukwudi (God exists), Chinonso (God is near), Chimuanya (God is awake) and the like. There is also a belief in the ancestral cult, a cult highly coveted by most traditionalists, especially old people. Qualifications into this realm is simply by one being

a married man with children, attaining good old age before death (and death should be *good death*, not death by hanging or dying because of some deadly diseases like swollen stomach) and being accorded a well befitting burial. Other forms of religion are tolerated in within the Southern Igbo land and Christianity seems to be a more outstanding and predominant religion according to Ezeonwu (2011).

Implications of Herbal usage in the Old Testament

In God's ontological design, fruits and leaves were meant for food and medicine as is understood in Ezekiel 47:12 "fruit and trees of all kinds will grow on both sides of the river, their leaves will not neither wither nor their fruit fail... their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing. "This text is instructive of the fact that God designed trees and plants with healing properties. Herbs and various products obtained from many different plants were among the most popular ancient/ Jewish medicines. They were either applied on the body as poultice or in most cases taken by mouth. Pamplona-Roger (2014) commented further on the curative potency of fruits and vegetables by stating that these products serve for health and healing. Hippocrates the father of medicine and a Greek physician believed that disease has natural causes and so he relied mainly on diet and various herbs to treat his patients. George Malkmus and Shockey (2006) add that if vegetables and fruits are eaten raw and juiced, they do not only nourish the body but can also make the body to heal itself if there is a disease already specified by God does not only nourish the cells but can normalize the body and make the body eventually to self- heal itself. Vegetables are phytochemicals, a group of compounds that may help prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. Vegetables contain substances that counteract the effect of carcinogens consumed as ingredients in other foods. Being low in calories, people can consume much of them without taking in excess energy. The high fibre content in them helps fill the stomach faster and so reduces the total amount of food consumed. They are good in checking obesity and its related problems. The Egyptians were known for their excessive consumption of watermelon which enabled them to cope with stress and their hot environment. The Israelites cried out for the herbs – melons, cucumbers, onions that they enjoyed while in Egypt (Nu 11:5).

The ancient Israelites (Old Testament People) do not only have one of the healthiest diets in the world (that's fruit, vegetables, oil, grains, nuts, legumes etc) but also utilise them. Steinberg (2016) reports that an extensive study conducted with 187 countries proves this claim. In fact, the orthodox Jews are very strict with maintaining God's dietary laws of eating fruits and vegetables which implies eating basically plant-based foods. The practice of eating herbs as food has kept them very healthy. They believe that laws of diet are

unquestionable laws (*chukkim* laws) and as blessing of obedience, God makes them healthy and very productive.

The Israelites are known for eating Mediterranean diet which is a diet that consists of plenty of vegetables, grains, nuts, legumes and fruits. In a Mediterranean diet, olive oil is the predominant oil. Study concluded in Israel in 2015 showed that the nation has one of the world's healthiest diets and this is diet of fruits and vegetables. As a nation that is lavishly blessed by God, they do not import their food. Nutrition has really been linked with emotional, physical and cognitive health. This herbal food gives the brain and bodies the vitamins and minerals it needs to stay well. Israel is one of the most well-developed nations in the globe. In fact, God had instructed them earlier on that if they obey his laws, none of the diseases that other nations suffer would come near them. Daniel and the three Hebrew men who preferred vegetables and water (the Mediterranean food) to the meat and wine in the king's palace were better nourished and mentally sound than the rest who ate something else (Dan 1:17).

The implications of Herbal food usage in Contemporary Igbo land

Herbal food serves as preventive medicine: Preventive remedy is one best way to overcome sickness and health problems. Traditional cultures used them and still use the herbs as preventive medicine. Industrial nations depended on them before the development of antibiotics in the 20th century and they proved to be effective. Overuse of antibiotics has caused antibiotic resistance. The natural whole foods contain natural antibiotics that can counteract this resistance (Ilonzo nd) Plant food nourishes the human cells in a very amazing way. The human cells need proper maintenance and it is plant food, especially raw food that supplies the vitamins, minerals and enzymes that enhance the activities of cells. When the cells are properly fed, they perform excellently but if not, their work will be hindered and this may generate ill health.

Herbal foods reverse and stop the progression of diseases: Lundell (2014) speaking particularly about heart health insists that eating foods that are closer to their natural state is one way of fighting inflammation. Natural / whole foods especially colourful fruits and vegetables can reverse damages caused in the heart for years. This same idea of reversal of cancerous diseases by plant dieting is held by Adodo (nd). In Adodo's words, "diet is a major factor in disease prevention...." He insists that the treatment of cancer is diet and not prescription drugs. According to him, "many scientific studies have proven that diet alone cures cancer "if you want to reverse your cancer, then you must reverse your diet since it is one's diet that actually cures". The people of South Eastern Igboland should eat herbs as food to help checkmate the influx of diverse diseases and also reverse their effect. if the

contemporary Igbo people of the South East would habitually use herbs/vegetables and fruits they will stay healthy.

Herbal feeding promotes longevity: In a report of his findings from analysis carried out on certain groups and their longevity status, (Clemency 2003) listed three groups that are particularly known for their longevity, the Hunza in Northern Pakistan, the Valcabamba in Ecuador and the Georgians in the Caucasus. Although their ages have been exaggerated at times, these groups did in the past have much higher-than-average number of healthy and active elderly members. These groups eat largely plant food diets.

Herbal foods reduce stress: Collins (2012) states that ...” Vegetables in general reduce stress and sharpen the brain, the leafy green vegetables in particular, help slow down mental decline and keep the brain young. Vegetables and fruits like spinach, celery, broccoli, tomatoes, avocado pea, blueberries, sunflower seeds, green peppers and collards are all useful in this regard because they counteract the negative things that tend to disrupt brain work.

Using herbal food guarantees skin health: A sure way to have healthy and glowing skin is by consuming lots of fruits and vegetables. In fact, it makes people who use it to look and feel younger than they are.

Improves children health and total well-being: Parents who introduce herbal foods in their homes live to enjoy a healthy and balanced development of their children. They help children maintain a healthy weight, avoid certain health problems, stabilize their energy, and sharpen their minds. A healthy diet can also have a profound effect on a child’s sense of mental and emotional well-being, helping to prevent conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, to mention a few. Eating well can support a child’s healthy growth and development into adulthood and may even play a role in lowering the risk of suicide in young people. If your child has already been diagnosed with a mental health problem, a healthy diet can help your child to manage the symptoms and regain control of their health. Ryan in Rufai (2016) in his contribution refers to fruits and vegetables as “real food” and maintains that eating adequate amount of them would enhance children’s innovation and creativity and then compete effectively with emerging world powers.

Herbs can be used for poverty alleviation: When God instructed man to eat plant food essentially, it is obvious that he took the poor into consideration because fruits and vegetables are both accessible and affordable by both the poor and the rich. these herbs grow all around our homes and some people throw them away in large quantities because they do not cherish them. A lot of South eastern Igbos have more regard for foreign foods than herbal food and these foreign processed and canned foods are very expensive to

procure (Echeta2014).Most people who consume sufficient fruits and vegetables do not spend fortunes in the hospitals. In this contemporary situation in Nigeria sticking to herbs as food and medicine is a way to stay out of poverty.

Herbal foods serve as primary Healthcare: Conceptualizing herbs as medicinal food would bring a health transformation to the modern Igbo land. It is a primary health care strategy that the World Health Organization has been advocating for. Indeed, African medicine and Igbo medicine contributes significantly to primary health care and that is the reason for its resilience. The World Health Organization cited in Gabasiane (2018) has issued a report that 80 percent of the population depend on traditional medicine for primary health care. This is a health strategy that cuts across all

Conclusion

This research examined the concept and usage of herbs in the Old Testament, precisely ancient Israelites and how the effective use of it can improve the general well-being of the Igbo people of the South East. Israel as a nation is strategic in world history and serves as an exemplary nation by God's design (Diprose 2000, Gen 12:1-3). Interesting, the people of Israel who adopted a rigid use of herbs as stated in Genesis 1:29 lived healthier lives and their bodies were disease resistant as Colbert (2009) reveals. The Israelites, especially the orthodox Jews still adhere strictly to God's dietary guideline. Herbal food does not only serve a nutritional purpose but also can be used as alternative medicine especially since orthodox medicine may not be available in very remote villages in the South Eastern part of Igbo land.

Nutritionists and health experts (Pamplona-Roger 2004, Colbert 2004, 2009, Adenegan and Adeoye 2011, Iwu 1993 and Malkmus and Shockey 2006) have in their various studies discovered the health benefits of fruit and vegetables/herbs and few of these are highlighted within this study. This study submits that herbal food usage is a good strategy for prevention of chronic diseases generally and when taken consistently and sufficiently can boost intellectual and innovative skills. According to Ilonzo (nd) using herbs for disease prevention is an old practice and the orthodox drugs that are used today are developed from traditional herbs which were modernized through technology. Amplifying what Ilonzo said, Akunyili (cited in Echeta 2014) who was the former director general of National Agency for Food and Drug Control (NAVDAC) made very interesting and encouraging remark by saying that herbal medicine has been a topic of debate globally for some time now and there is an increased interest in traditional and herbal medicine. She advised that since herbal medicine does not contain additives and artificial components that may be harmful to the body, people should use them to strengthen their immune system. She recommended these

affordable and available herbs for Nigerians. What Akunyili recommended many years ago is much more needed in the present Nigeria and contemporary South Eastern Igbo society.

This study made the case of the affordability of fruit and vegetables repelling the general claim that they are expensive. Most vegetables that are highly medicinal are caught from the bush at no cost. Most vegetables especially in rural communities are grown in our gardens and some are gotten from the bushes like (*utazi*, *uziza*, water leaf, hibiscus leaves/Zobo leaves, pawpaw leaves, guava). In addition to the food satisfaction they provide, they also save us the cost of treatment of diseases. Using herbs as food is a well-structured way of journeying out of poverty. Now that there is heavy hunger in the land, people need to plan their spending, make right food choices and reduce expenses they make in procuring drugs.

Recommendations

- It is recommended in this research paper that people should embrace fruit and vegetable dieting as a way of keeping themselves well- nourished and healthy.
- A re-orientation has to be done in order to sensitize people of both the efficacy of these and also the fact they do not have to be prepared by special sacred persons.
- Use of herbs should be emphasized at the grass root level and in very remote places in the south East where people find it difficult to get primary Health care.
- Church ministers should desist from discouraging their members from using herbs.
- Since most people criticize herbs as unhygienic and without dosage those who make them for sale should improve on the preparation and include accurate dosage.

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