

# **African Traditional Medicine: Conserving, Mainstreaming and Honouring Indigenous Medical Knowledge for Sustainability**

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## **African Traditional Medicine: Conserving, Mainstreaming and Honouring Indigenous Medical Knowledge for Sustainability**

**Kariuki Muigua\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper critically examines ways through which indigenous medical knowledge in Africa can be protected for sustainability. The paper argues that Africa is rich in indigenous medical knowledge which has played a key role in fostering the health of individuals and communities for many centuries. Despite its appropriateness, the paper posits that indigenous medical knowledge in Africa is facing mounting threats undermining the right to health and sustainability. It examines some of the major challenges facing indigenous medical knowledge in Africa. In light of these challenges, the paper proposes reforms towards conserving, mainstreaming and honouring indigenous medical knowledge in Africa for sustainability.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Indigenous medical knowledge also known as traditional medical knowledge refers to indigenous healing practices and beliefs that encompass a holistic understanding of health by taking into account physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being, and are closely tied to the cultural and environmental contexts of indigenous peoples and communities<sup>1</sup>. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), indigenous/traditional medical knowledge comprises of codified or non-codified systems for healthcare and well-being, including practices, skills, knowledge and philosophies originating in different historical and cultural contexts, which are distinct

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous Medicine., Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/indigenous-medicine#:~:text=Indigenous%20medicines%20refer%20to%20traditional,environmental%20contexts%20of%20Indigenous%20communities>. (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

from and pre-date biomedicine<sup>2</sup>. Indigenous medical knowledge has also been defined as the collection of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous peoples and communities that is applied in the maintenance of health and the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illnesses<sup>3</sup>.

Indigenous medical knowledge plays a crucial role in the quest towards sustainability. It has been argued that traditional medical knowledge has social, cultural and scientific value and is important for many indigenous peoples and local communities all over the world<sup>4</sup>. For many centuries, indigenous medical knowledge has been an integral resource for health in households and communities even before the advent of modern medical knowledge<sup>5</sup>. According to WHO, indigenous medical knowledge emphasizes nature-based remedies and holistic, personalized approaches to restore balance of mind, body and environment<sup>6</sup>. Indigenous medical knowledge has significantly contributed to breakthroughs in modern medicine. For example, there is a long history of herbal medicine being translated into pharmaceutical products for effective treatments of health conditions<sup>7</sup>.

However, despite its effectiveness, it has been pointed out that indigenous medical knowledge has largely been ignored due to advances in modern medicine and as a result,

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<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization., 'Traditional, Complementary and Integrative Medicine' Available at [https://www.who.int/health-topics/traditional-complementary-and-integrative-medicine#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/traditional-complementary-and-integrative-medicine#tab=tab_1) (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization., 'Traditional Medicine' Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/traditional-medicine> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

<sup>4</sup> World Intellectual Property Organization., 'Intellectual Property and Traditional Medical Knowledge' Available at <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-rn2023-5-6-en-intellectual-property-and-traditional-medical-knowledge.pdf> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization., 'Traditional Medicine' Op Cit

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization., 'Traditional, Complementary and Integrative Medicine' Op Cit

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

this knowledge is disappearing in most parts of the world<sup>8</sup>. In addition, there have been cases involving misappropriation of indigenous medical knowledge by unauthorized third parties, who have patented compounds derived from traditional medicines without the consent of and fair compensation to traditional medical knowledge holders<sup>9</sup>. In light of these challenges, protecting indigenous medical knowledge is vital for sustainability.

This paper critically examines ways through which indigenous medical knowledge in Africa can be protected for sustainability. The paper argues that Africa is rich in indigenous medical knowledge which has played a key role in fostering the health of individuals and communities for many centuries. Despite its appropriateness, the paper posits that indigenous medical knowledge in Africa is facing mounting threats undermining the right to health and sustainability. It examines some of the major challenges facing indigenous medical knowledge in Africa. In light of these challenges, the paper proposes reforms towards conserving, mainstreaming and honouring indigenous medical knowledge in Africa for sustainability.

## **2.0 Indigenous Medical Knowledge in Africa: Benefits and Challenges**

Africa has a rich history in indigenous medical knowledge. For example, it has been observed that traditional medicine has been utilised by communities in Africa for many centuries<sup>10</sup>. Before the introduction of modern medical knowledge, individuals, families and communities in Africa used plants, herbs, roots, leaves, tree barks and specific types of soil to cure pain and illnesses<sup>11</sup>. Further, nearly all African societies had traditional

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<sup>8</sup> Panghal. M., 'Indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants used by Saperas community of Khetawas, Jhajjar District, Haryana, India' Available at <https://ethnobiomed.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1746-4269-6-4> (Accessed on 24/09/2025)

<sup>9</sup> World Intellectual Property Organization., 'Intellectual Property and Traditional Medical Knowledge' Op Cit

<sup>10</sup> Kilimwiko. L., 'Why Indigenous knowledge must be preserved' Available at <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/maasai-know-how-treat-malaria-bark-many-other-indigenous-groups-they-have-immense-medical#:~:text=For%20the%20Maasai%2C%20the%20Earth,aid%20recovery%20from%20blood%20loss.> (Accessed on 25/09/2025)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

healers, medicine-men and herbalists who dispensed healing through the use of herbs among other products<sup>12</sup>. These specialists had relevant expertise and experience in their craft and could identify the root-cause of diseases and illnesses similar to diagnosis in modern medicine<sup>13</sup>. Physical conditions were treated using plants, herbs, roots, animal products and leaves while psychological conditions were treated through words and cleansing rituals<sup>14</sup>. Further, nearly all African societies had mid-wives who took note of relevant signs and stages of pregnancy therefore ensuring adequate medical care and safe delivery for pregnant women<sup>15</sup>.

Indigenous medical knowledge therefore has a long history in Africa. It has been argued that the practice of traditional medicine and healing in Africa predates most of the other traditional medical sciences and is much more prevalent among indigenous and local communities in the continent when compared to modern medicine<sup>16</sup>. Indigenous medical knowledge in Africa is a holistic approach that takes into account various types of specialty including divination, spiritualism and herbalism<sup>17</sup>. It has been argued that illnesses and diseases in Africa societies were regarded as having both natural and supernatural causes and as a result, they were treated by both physical and spiritual means including divination, incantations, animal sacrifice, exorcism, and herbs<sup>18</sup>. Indigenous medical knowledge in Africa is based on the culture, religious background, knowledge attitudes, and beliefs of a particular society<sup>19</sup>. It focuses on holistic healing towards achieving equilibrium between the body, mind and soul and the external

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<sup>12</sup> Mumo. P., 'Holistic Healing: An Analytical Review of Medicine-men in African Societies' Available at <https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/42003/Holistic%20Healing.pdf;jsessionid=245B1D7001DD0CC4420238DC6FBD5C04?sequence=1> (Accessed on 25/09/2025)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ozioma. E., & Chinwe. O., 'Herbal Medicines in African Traditional Medicine' Available at <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/64851> (Accessed on 25/09/2025)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Chaitanya. M et al., 'Traditional African Medicine' Available at <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/75561> (Accessed on 25/09/2025)

environment<sup>20</sup>. Indigenous medical knowledge is a treasured resource among African communities and was passed down from generation to generation thus enabling individuals, families and communities to maintain good health by preventing, diagnosing and treating diseases and illnesses<sup>21</sup>.

Traditional medical knowledge in Africa is still relevant in the modern era. For example, it has been pointed out that in developing countries, traditional medicine is usually more accessible to larger segments of the population especially in rural areas due to fewer cultural barriers, and the availability of more traditional healers when compared to physicians<sup>22</sup>. Further, it has been argued that the high cost of modern medical treatment has led to more citizens in Africa embracing traditional medical practices<sup>23</sup>. In addition, cases of counterfeit biomedicines have led to broad mistrust of modern medicine therefore leading to more people favouring indigenous healing, depending on the illness or severity of symptoms<sup>24</sup>. It has also been argued that indigenous medical knowledge including the use of herbal medicine is more trusted in Africa due to the greater transparency in their creation, and the more equitable relationship between traditional healers and patients<sup>25</sup>. Indigenous medical knowledge and healing therefore remains important for many people in Africa due to its accessibility, affordability and transparency coupled with the mistrust and suspicion of biomedicine and big pharma<sup>26</sup>. Despite its appropriateness, indigenous medical knowledge in Africa faces several challenges. For instance, the use of indigenous medical knowledge and healing practices raises several concerns including incorrect diagnosis, improper dosage, low hygiene

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Mayer. J.D., 'Medical Geography' *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences.*, 2001, pp 9518-9523

<sup>23</sup> Fokunang. C.N., 'Traditional Medicine: Past, Present and Future Research and Development Prospects and Integration in the National Health System of Cameroon' Available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3252219/> (Accessed on 25/09/2025)

<sup>24</sup> Howland. O., 'Fakes and chemicals: indigenous medicine in contemporary Kenya and implications for health equity' *International Journal for Equity in Health.*, Volume 19, No. 199 (2020)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

standards, the secrecy of some healing methods and the absence of written records about patients<sup>27</sup>. Further, most indigenous medical knowledge systems are disregarded by conventional medicine<sup>28</sup>. In addition, absence of governing laws and policies has undermined the official recognition of Africa's traditional medicine and its integration into modern healthcare<sup>29</sup>. WHO further asserts that traditional medicine products are not always safe and can have negative health consequences, particularly when used in combination with other medicines or when taken in high doses<sup>30</sup>. Improper use of traditional medicines can put patients at risk for potentially serious side effects as a result of allergies, drug interactions, contamination of the products with pesticides and trauma inflicted by inexperienced or poorly trained practitioners<sup>31</sup>. Further, there have been cases when indigenous medical knowledge has been misappropriated by unauthorized third parties, who have patented compounds derived from traditional medicines without consent or adequate compensation to indigenous peoples and local communities who are custodians of such knowledge<sup>32</sup>. In addition, it has been argued that displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands and territories threatens to extinguish centuries of accumulated traditional medical practices which are closely tied to their specific environment<sup>33</sup>.

In light of the foregoing challenges, it is imperative to protect indigenous medical knowledge in Africa for sustainability.

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<sup>27</sup> Fokunang. C.N., 'Traditional Medicine: Past, Present and Future Research and Development Prospects and Integration in the National Health System of Cameroon' Op Cit

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> World Health Organization., 'Traditional Medicine' Op Cit

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> World Intellectual Property Organization., 'Intellectual Property and Traditional Medical Knowledge' Op Cit

<sup>33</sup> Kilimwiko. L., 'Why Indigenous knowledge must be preserved' Op Cit

### **3.0 Conserving, Mainstreaming and Honouring Indigenous Medical Knowledge in Africa for Sustainability**

Indigenous medical knowledge plays a key role in ensuring good health and well-being for many Africans. Traditional healing practices in Africa are more accessible, transparent, culturally-sensitive and affordable and can thus bridge the gap many people experience when they are unable to access biomedical treatments while ensuring equitable coverage for healthcare<sup>34</sup>. Indigenous medical knowledge has been practiced by communities in Africa for many centuries and still relevant in the modern era.

It is therefore imperative to recognise and mainstream indigenous medical knowledge in Africa. In order to achieve this goal, there is need to harmonize the practice of indigenous medical knowledge and create synergies between traditional medicine and modern medical knowledge<sup>35</sup>. Honouring and mainstreaming indigenous medical knowledge into national health policies and systems can improve health outcomes by increasing the availability, accessibility and affordability of health services, especially at the level of primary health care<sup>36</sup>. According to WHO, mainstreaming of indigenous medical knowledge into national health systems must be done appropriately, effectively and safely, based on the latest scientific evidence<sup>37</sup>. This requires quality control systems including the standardization of traditional medicine including herbal medicine in order to ensure the safety and well-being of citizens<sup>38</sup>.

In addition, it is imperative to conserve indigenous medical knowledge in Africa. This knowledge is often misappropriated by third parties to the detriment of indigenous

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<sup>34</sup> Howland. O., 'Fakes and chemicals: indigenous medicine in contemporary Kenya and implications for health equity' Op Cit

<sup>35</sup> Fokunang. C.N., 'Traditional Medicine: Past, Present and Future Research and Development Prospects and Integration in the National Health System of Cameroon' Op Cit

<sup>36</sup> World Health Organization., 'Traditional Medicine' Op Cit

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Chaitanya. M et al., 'Traditional African Medicine' Op Cit

peoples and local communities<sup>39</sup>. Further, lack of documentation and threats to indigenous lands and territories undermine the conservation of indigenous medical knowledge<sup>40</sup>. It is therefore imperative to strengthen the protection of indigenous medical knowledge in Africa including through Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)<sup>41</sup>. This is key towards preventing unauthorised exploitation of indigenous medical knowledge by third parties<sup>42</sup>. Further, there is need to establish equitable benefit-sharing frameworks in order to ensure that indigenous peoples and local communities receive adequate benefits and compensation when their indigenous medical knowledge is commercialized<sup>43</sup>. There is also need to invest in documentation of indigenous medical knowledge including through the use of traditional digital knowledge libraries for posterity<sup>44</sup>. Protecting the land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities is also key in conserving indigenous medical knowledge since it is intrinsically tied to the environment with specific trees, plants and herbs being utilised for healing purposes<sup>45</sup>.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Indigenous medical knowledge in Africa is a valuable resource that can strengthen health systems towards sustainability. It has proved useful in ensuring good health and well-being for many centuries and it is still relevant in current times. Conserving, mainstreaming and honouring indigenous medical knowledge in Africa is therefore vital towards effectively harnessing Africa's traditional medicine for sustainability.

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<sup>39</sup> World Intellectual Property Organization., 'Intellectual Property and Traditional Medical Knowledge' Op Cit

<sup>40</sup> Fokunang. C.N., 'Traditional Medicine: Past, Present and Future Research and Development Prospects and Integration in the National Health System of Cameroon' Op Cit

<sup>41</sup> Veronica. L.A et al., 'Intellectual Property Protection for Traditional Herbal Medicine in the Cultural Science Centre of Excellence in Africa, Gulu University, Gulu District, Uganda: Challenges and Opportunities' Available at [https://www.scirp.org/pdf/aasoci20241412\\_42292083.pdf](https://www.scirp.org/pdf/aasoci20241412_42292083.pdf) (Accessed on 25/09/2025)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Kilimwiko. L., 'Why Indigenous knowledge must be preserved' Op Cit

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