Medicinal Plants and Traditional Medicine in Sierra Leone
Cyrus Macfoy, Ph.D.
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Reviewed by C. Magbaily Fyle
Professor Emeritus, University of Sierra Leone and The Ohio State University

This is a beautiful and refreshing book about scholarly writing on Africa, in this case with a focus on Africa’s medicinal plants and traditional medicine. It attempts to explore, in highly scholarly terms, the role of traditional medicinal plants in today’s and yesterday’s world both in Africa and globally, and the actual practice of traditional medicine in an African, particularly Sierra Leone setting, a practice that is still alive today but being given much less of the benefit and usefulness it deserves.

Most importantly, Macfoy’s work considerably elevates traditional plants and medicine in Africa to the status of scholarly work, something with which many of our learned men in Africa are little familiar, either by accident or design. This latter circumstance therefore tends to relegate African traditional practices in medicine to a backwater by ‘educated’ people who live in the formal sector, as if one becomes old fashioned if attention is paid to this sector.

And then we also hear about claims in the Western world of the contribution of Africa and its peoples to advancement universally. The practice of traditional medicine as elaborated by Macfoy shows the result of local observation, experimentation and application of results that help to explain how African peoples have survived without Western intervention in times past. Africans should therefore be proud to hold up studies like this and talk intelligently about Africa’s contribution to ‘modern’ medicine, with all of the processes and medications listed herein derived from African plants while the authorship of the knowledge that brought these to light has been suppressed, nor have the Africans responsible been ever rewarded.

Very interestingly, Part 1. Introduction to Traditional Medicine puts the study in the context of understanding and practice of medicine in today’s world, while tackling issues not considered as belonging to medical matters by the average observer. Issues like the link between beliefs and praxis, so prominent in traditional medicine, are discussed to show that there is relevance in that terrain as is slowly becoming recognized today. The thin line between perceptions of superstition and such religious beliefs has contributed significantly towards the
lax attention to traditional practices in our modern societies, particularly in Africa. Dr. Macfoy does show instances where even the conservative Sierra Leone formal system begins to recognize the role of, for example, traditional birth attendants in the conception of medical practice in Sierra Leone today.

It is in this section that Macfoy discusses the powerful properties of the *Moringa* plant which left me tongue-tied. Clearly, most people are unfamiliar with the properties of such a plant called “the tree of life”, or it would have been in more widespread use to cure illnesses like diabetes and hypertension, so common among African peoples.

The discussion of the plants, their names, both biological and local, the methods of preparation and use in the traditional setting in Parts II and III, is carefully delineated by the eye of a biochemist scholar that Dr. Macfoy is, taking into account all of the practices and beliefs attendant upon the process. He lists, for example, the plant with the botanical name of *Striga macrantha* locally called in Krio, the main lingua franca in Sierra Leone, as ‘*efo-di-strong*’ (I think also called ‘*efo-di-wanplace’*). This, he states, has the medicinal use as a love potion, “to induce a deeper love...(and) also acts as an aphrodisiac” (120). The delineation in this section left a reader like me spellbound for hours.

This section is followed by a presentation of “Chemical Analysis and Biological Activity of Selected Sierra Leonean Plants” in Part IV. For the more scholarly inclined reader, this section demonstrates that the analyses are not anecdotal, but based on modern day laboratory research, some of which has also been done by scholars other than Dr. Macfoy, and cited by the author.

This work has taken a few decades of work and study to bring to light. There are areas in the book where one can quibble. I would have liked to see a short discussion of quantities and dosage, the kinds of criticisms quickly put forward by western trained chemists. Granted, most of the plants used for medicine Macfoy analyzes present an indication of dosage. But some do not, and a broad discussion of this matter could have helped to put such concerns to rest.

Also, very importantly, is the vexing problem of orthography. I know that publications in African languages attempting to use a more relevant orthography stumble on issues of cost, as some of the symbols are not readily available. We then fall into the problem that Dr. Macfoy experienced when we cannot tell whether the letter “o” represents “o” as in “top” or as in “move”, or “go”. This makes some of the names in Sierra Leonean languages difficult to identify even by Sierra Leonean readers, particularly younger ones who are not already familiar with those names.

There are also minor problems with the bibliography, as a couple of citations in the body of the work are either not properly or not at all represented in the bibliography.

All of this is not to detract from the value of this work which I believe sets a standard for studying African cultures and bringing them to the full stream of contemporary discourse, benefiting Africans and the world community.