

## **INDIGENOUS AFRICAN SYSTEMS: A STUDY OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE, AGRICULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY**

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### **Abstract**

*The marginalization of indigenous African systems encompassing traditional medicine, agricultural practices, and local technologies represents a profound challenge to cultural identity, ecological sustainability, and socio-economic development. This study critically interrogates the historical trajectory, functional significance, and contemporary relevance of these systems within African societies. Employing a mixed-methods research design, combining historical analysis with qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the research investigates the contributions of indigenous systems to healthcare delivery, agricultural productivity, and community cohesion. Findings underscore the superiority of certain indigenous practices in fostering sustainability, ecological resilience, and cultural continuity, particularly when juxtaposed with modern methodologies. However, these systems remain underutilized due to structural neglect, globalization-induced disruptions, and socio-political disenfranchisement. The study advocates for a strategic framework to integrate indigenous knowledge into modern policy and practice through educational initiatives, institutional capacity building, and multi-stakeholder collaborations. This integrative approach is positioned as essential for safeguarding Africa's rich cultural heritage and leveraging indigenous systems as pivotal tools for sustainable development and resilience in the face of global challenges.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Traditional Medicine, Agricultural Practices, Cultural Identity, Sustainable Development, Ecological Resilience

### **Introduction**

Indigenous African systems encompass a dynamic interplay of traditional medicine, agricultural practices, and indigenous technologies, serving as pivotal elements of cultural identity, community cohesion, and ecological sustainability. These systems, deeply rooted in historical contexts and local customs, represent a reservoir of knowledge and practices that have evolved over centuries. They offer invaluable insights into sustainable living and adaptive strategies, shaping how communities engage with their environment and address societal challenges. This research critically examines the evolution, contemporary relevance, and challenges of these systems, emphasizing their potential contributions to sustainable development in an era of rapid globalization.

Traditional medicine forms a cornerstone of indigenous African systems, providing primary healthcare solutions for millions of people. This knowledge, transmitted orally through generations, utilizes local flora, fauna, and minerals in diverse healing practices, reflecting a deep understanding of the interplay between nature and human well-being. Beyond physical health, traditional medicine integrates spiritual and communal dimensions, reinforcing its role as a custodian of cultural heritage and social stability. Despite its efficacy and accessibility, traditional medicine faces increasing marginalization due to the dominance of modern medical paradigms and inadequate institutional recognition. Agricultural practices within indigenous systems illustrate profound ecological wisdom and resilience. Techniques such as intercropping, crop rotation, and the use of indigenous crop varieties have ensured food

security, soil fertility, and biodiversity preservation for generations. These methods, tailored to specific environmental contexts, embody principles of sustainability that are increasingly relevant in combating climate change and addressing food insecurity.

However, the encroachment of industrialized agriculture and the allure of modern farming methods threaten the continuity of these practices, posing risks to both cultural and ecological diversity. Indigenous technologies further highlight the ingenuity and adaptability of African communities. Rooted in local resources and environmental knowledge, these technologies include traditional building methods, irrigation systems, and craftsmanship. Such innovations optimize resource use while minimizing environmental impact, fostering a balance between development and ecological stewardship. By embedding cultural values into technological practices, these systems not only address practical needs but also sustain a sense of identity and continuity within communities. Despite their strengths, indigenous African systems face existential threats in the face of globalization, industrialization, and urbanization. The younger generation's increasing preference for modern technologies and practices accelerates the erosion of traditional knowledge. Additionally, the commodification of indigenous systems raises ethical concerns around intellectual property and exploitation, necessitating robust frameworks for their protection and promotion.

This study argues that integrating indigenous African systems into contemporary development strategies offers a pathway toward sustainability and resilience; bridging the gap between traditional and modern practices, particularly in healthcare and agriculture, can enhance the effectiveness and inclusiveness of development policies. Recognizing the complementary strengths of these systems is essential for fostering community cohesion, ecological balance, and cultural preservation.

In light of these challenges and opportunities, this research underscores the urgency of preserving and integrating indigenous African systems into modern societal frameworks. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of their value and advocate for actionable strategies that leverage their strengths for sustainable development in Africa.

### **Traditional Medicine**

Traditional medicine in Africa is an integral aspect of health care, deeply embedded in the cultural, spiritual, and ecological fabric of African societies. This system is distinguished by its reliance on natural remedies, spiritual practices, and an interconnected understanding of human health. Unlike conventional biomedical approaches that focus primarily on symptom management, traditional medicine adopts a holistic paradigm, addressing the interplay between physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of well-being (Meyer et al., 2018). This comprehensive approach allows traditional medicine to treat not only diseases but also their root causes within broader cultural and communal contexts.

Central to the practice of traditional medicine are healers, who serve as primary healthcare providers in many African communities. These practitioners, often referred to as traditional healers or herbalists, possess extensive expertise in the use of medicinal plants, animal-derived substances, and minerals. Their knowledge is both empirical and culturally informed, derived from years of apprenticeship under experienced mentors and rooted in the ecological and social realities of their communities. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge ensures the continuity of practices and reinforces the healers' role as custodians of cultural heritage.

The efficacy of traditional medicine is largely attributed to its use of natural remedies, informed by a profound understanding of local ecosystems. Traditional healers demonstrate intricate knowledge of the therapeutic properties of flora and fauna, tailoring treatments to the specific needs and conditions of their patients. This localization of knowledge not only enhances the effectiveness of remedies but also reflects a symbiotic relationship between human health and environmental sustainability. The enduring relevance of traditional medicine lies in its adaptive resilience, which has enabled it to coexist with and complement modern healthcare systems. In addition to its reliance on natural remedies; traditional medicine incorporates spiritual practices that address psychological and emotional dimensions of health. Many African cultures conceptualize illness as a disturbance of spiritual or communal harmony, necessitating healing that transcends the physical body. Rituals, prayers, and divination are often employed alongside herbal treatments, fostering a sense of community support and emotional well-being. This holistic approach reinforces the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit, which is central to traditional African worldviews.

Traditional medicine remains particularly vital in rural and underserved areas, where access to modern healthcare services is limited. Traditional healers often serve as the primary, and sometimes only, healthcare providers in these regions, leveraging their deep familiarity with local health challenges and culturally resonant practices. Studies indicate that many individuals in these communities prefer the services of traditional healers over distant or unfamiliar modern medical facilities (Meyer et al., 2018). This preference underscores the accessibility and cultural alignment of traditional medicine in addressing diverse health needs.

Despite its enduring relevance, traditional medicine faces significant challenges in the contemporary era. Globalization, urbanization, and shifts in health-seeking behaviors have led to the gradual erosion of traditional practices, particularly among younger generations who gravitate toward modern healthcare options. Additionally, the lack of formal recognition and regulation of traditional medicine contributes to skepticism about its safety and efficacy, further marginalizing this critical knowledge system. The commodification and exploitation of traditional remedies raise ethical concerns about intellectual property and the equitable sharing of benefits derived from indigenous knowledge. The resilience of traditional medicine in Africa underscores its potential as a valuable complement to modern healthcare systems. By integrating traditional healing practices into broader health frameworks, policymakers and practitioners can enhance health outcomes while preserving cultural heritage. Efforts to formalize and support traditional medicine—through education, research, and policy reforms are essential for safeguarding its legacy and maximizing its contributions to sustainable healthcare. Recognizing the importance of traditional medicine not only addresses immediate health challenges but also fosters a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to health and well-being in African societies.

### **Cultural Significance**

Traditional medicine in Africa transcends its role as a healthcare system, serving as a cornerstone of cultural identity and social cohesion. Traditional healers are highly esteemed within their communities, fulfilling roles that extend beyond healthcare provision to encompass spiritual leadership and the preservation of cultural knowledge (Ogunbanjo et al., 2019). Their practices reflect the values, beliefs, and social norms of their communities, emphasizing a holistic approach to well-being that integrates physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This cultural integration fosters a shared sense of responsibility and

collective identity, strengthening community bonds. Traditional medicine, therefore, functions not only as a means of addressing individual health needs but also as a vital mechanism for maintaining the social and cultural fabric of African societies.

### **Effectiveness and Therapeutic Potential**

The efficacy of traditional medicine remains a significant area of academic and medical inquiry. Numerous studies have highlighted the therapeutic potential of traditional remedies in treating ailments such as malaria, diabetes, and hypertension (Khan et al., 2020). These remedies are underpinned by empirical knowledge derived from centuries of observation and practice, demonstrating a profound understanding of the medicinal properties of local flora. Traditional healers' expertise in selecting, preparing, and administering these remedies exemplifies the depth of indigenous knowledge systems. However, the absence of widespread scientific validation and standardized methodologies often leads to skepticism within the modern medical community. Bridging this divide through collaborative research and the integration of traditional practices into modern healthcare frameworks could enhance the credibility and utilization of traditional medicine, ensuring its continued relevance in contemporary health systems.

### **Challenges to Sustainability**

Despite its cultural and therapeutic significance, traditional medicine faces critical threats to its sustainability. Chief among these is the loss of biodiversity, driven by deforestation, urbanization, and environmental degradation (Kahn, 2021). Medicinal plants, which form the foundation of many traditional remedies, are increasingly endangered, posing significant challenges to traditional healers who depend on these natural resources. Additionally, the lack of formal recognition and regulation of traditional medicine in many African countries exacerbates its vulnerability. The absence of standardized practices, institutional support, and intellectual property protections hinders the development and preservation of traditional healing systems. This marginalization not only threatens the livelihoods of traditional healers but also risks the erosion of a critical component of cultural heritage.

### **Impact of Globalization and Urbanization**

Globalization and urbanization have further compounded the challenges confronting traditional medicine. Younger generations, particularly those in urban centers, are increasingly drawn to modern healthcare systems, which are often perceived as more advanced and reliable. This generational shift has contributed to a decline in the transmission of traditional knowledge and a diminished societal reliance on traditional healers. The widespread availability of modern pharmaceuticals, which frequently offer quicker symptomatic relief, has also led to a perception of traditional remedies as outdated. However, modern medicine often neglects the holistic approach integral to traditional systems, particularly in rural settings where health is understood as an interplay of physical, spiritual, and social factors. Addressing this disparity requires recognizing the complementary strengths of both systems and fostering dialogue to integrate their practices for the benefit of diverse communities.

### **Integration of Traditional and Modern Healthcare**

One potential solution to the challenges facing traditional medicine is the integration of indigenous practices with modern healthcare systems. Such integration has the potential to enhance the overall quality of healthcare by offering patients a broader range of treatment

options. In some cases, traditional remedies could complement modern treatments, particularly in areas where conventional healthcare infrastructure is lacking. Recognizing the efficacy of traditional medicine could also foster greater collaboration between healers and modern healthcare professionals, creating a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to health care (Meyer et al., 2018). For example, the inclusion of traditional herbal medicines in formal healthcare policies could improve access to affordable and culturally relevant treatments.

### **Preservation and Transmission of Knowledge**

The preservation of traditional medicine is both a healthcare imperative and a cornerstone of cultural survival. Indigenous knowledge systems are under increasing pressure from modernization, making deliberate efforts to document and sustain these practices critical for their survival. Initiatives aimed at preserving traditional medicine should focus on fostering the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Programs such as mentorship schemes, community-driven workshops, and training opportunities can equip younger generations with the expertise necessary to uphold these traditions. Moreover, systematic research into the pharmacological properties of traditional remedies provides an avenue to validate and integrate these practices into contemporary healthcare systems. Such research not only enhances the credibility of traditional medicine but also creates opportunities for synergistic collaboration with modern medical frameworks. By scientifically investigating the therapeutic efficacy of indigenous remedies, traditional medicine can secure a more formalized role within the broader healthcare landscape, promoting both its sustainability and societal acceptance.

### **Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities**

Traditional medicine continues to occupy a vital space at the nexus of healthcare, culture, and community, particularly in rural and underserved areas of Africa. Despite its enduring relevance, the system faces significant challenges. The loss of biodiversity, driven by deforestation, urbanization, and climate change, poses a severe threat to the availability of essential medicinal plants. Similarly, the lack of formal recognition and regulation undermines the integration of traditional medicine into national healthcare policies, marginalizing its practitioners and practices. However, these challenges also present opportunities for innovation and collaboration. Sustainable biodiversity conservation programs can help safeguard the ecological resources necessary for traditional medicine. Simultaneously, formalizing traditional practices through legal frameworks and institutional recognition can protect the intellectual property rights of traditional healers and ensure ethical utilization of their knowledge. By fostering dialogue between traditional and modern medical systems, African societies can leverage the strengths of both, creating a more inclusive and effective healthcare ecosystem.

### **Indigenous Agricultural Systems and Technologies**

Indigenous agricultural practices and technologies in African societies represent an invaluable reservoir of ecological adaptation, sustainability, and cultural identity. Rooted in centuries of accumulated local knowledge, these systems provide critical insights into addressing contemporary challenges such as food insecurity, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. Traditional farming techniques, such as intercropping, crop rotation, and the cultivation of indigenous plant species, have long ensured food security while promoting soil fertility and resilience to climatic variations.

However, the intensification of globalization and industrialization has marginalized these practices, often replacing them with unsustainable, high-input agricultural systems. This marginalization not only threatens food security but also erodes the cultural heritage embedded in indigenous agricultural practices. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced approach that recognizes the ecological, cultural, and economic significance of traditional agricultural systems. By integrating indigenous knowledge with modern agricultural science, African societies can enhance sustainability while preserving their cultural heritage.

### **Conclusion**

Traditional medicine, indigenous agricultural practices, and technologies are not merely relics of the past but dynamic systems of knowledge that continue to shape African societies. They embody a unique blend of cultural identity, ecological sustainability, and community resilience. To ensure their survival and relevance in a rapidly changing world, it is essential to adopt comprehensive strategies that include the documentation, validation, and integration of these practices into modern frameworks. Through collaboration, respect for indigenous knowledge, and sustainable resource management, these systems can play a transformative role in addressing contemporary global challenges while preserving Africa's rich cultural heritage.

### **Agricultural Systems as Cultural and Ecological Foundations**

Agriculture forms the bedrock of indigenous African societies, not only as an economic activity but also as a cultural institution deeply connected to the environment. The traditional practices of crop rotation, intercropping, and the use of organic fertilizers are reflective of a profound understanding of local ecosystems (Bocoum, 2016). These methods, honed over generations, emphasize the importance of ecological balance, with crop rotation replenishing soil nutrients and intercropping optimizing land use and reducing pest infestations. The environmental adaptability of these practices ensures their sustainability, particularly in regions facing soil degradation and resource scarcity. Furthermore, they demonstrate an ecological literacy that modern agricultural systems, heavily dependent on synthetic inputs, often overlook.

The significance of these practices extends beyond ecological considerations; they also serve as a key component of social cohesion and cultural identity. In many African communities, farming is not just an individual endeavor but a communal activity that fosters social bonds. This link between agriculture and culture is essential for maintaining community resilience, as shared farming practices promote collective responsibility for land management and resource conservation. Thus, the sustainability of indigenous agriculture is not solely based on environmental factors but also deeply embedded in the social fabric of these communities.

### **Food Security and Nutritional Benefits of Indigenous Agriculture**

Indigenous agricultural systems play a vital role in food security and nutrition, particularly in rural communities where access to modern agricultural technologies and external food sources is limited. Traditional crops, which are often more resilient to local environmental stresses, including climate variability, ensure food security by providing a reliable source of nutrition (Sullivan, 2021). These crops contribute to dietary diversity, a key factor in ensuring nutritional security, as indigenous farmers cultivate a variety of plants that provide essential vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients necessary for human health. This diversity contrasts with the monocultures often promoted by modern industrial agriculture, which can lead to

nutritional deficiencies when staple crops like maize or rice dominate local diets. Additionally, the cultivation and consumption of indigenous crops foster the maintenance of cultural practices related to food, reinforcing a sense of identity and community. The consumption of locally grown food strengthens social ties, as it is often associated with traditional rituals, festivals, and shared meals. Thus, indigenous agricultural systems not only secure food and nutrition but also preserve cultural continuity.

### **Challenges to Indigenous Agricultural Systems**

Despite their ecological and cultural significance, indigenous agricultural systems face significant challenges. The encroachment of industrial agriculture, characterized by large-scale monoculture and the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, threatens the sustainability of traditional farming practices. The shift toward industrial agriculture often results in the erosion of local knowledge systems, as farmers are incentivized to adopt modern techniques that prioritize short-term productivity over long-term ecological health (Pretty, 2018). The displacement of indigenous crops by high-yield, non-native species can reduce biodiversity and undermine the resilience of local ecosystems to environmental stresses such as climate change.

Land grabbing, often driven by foreign investment in large-scale agriculture, further exacerbates these challenges by displacing local communities from their ancestral lands. This not only strips communities of their agricultural heritage but also disrupts their social and cultural structures. Furthermore, the effects of climate change, such as prolonged droughts and unpredictable weather patterns, pose additional threats to indigenous agricultural systems, which are often highly dependent on stable environmental conditions.

### **Indigenous Technologies and Environmental Sustainability**

Indigenous technologies in African societies are equally vital, representing the ingenuity and adaptability of local communities in response to their specific environmental and social contexts. These technologies, ranging from traditional irrigation systems to sustainable building practices, are rooted in a deep understanding of local ecosystems and resource management (Smith, 2020). For example, traditional irrigation techniques such as basin irrigation and terracing have been developed to conserve water in arid regions, enabling communities to maximize agricultural productivity while minimizing environmental impact (Thompson, 2019). These technologies demonstrate the capacity of indigenous knowledge to offer sustainable solutions to contemporary environmental challenges.

In addition to their practical applications, indigenous technologies often carry cultural significance, serving as symbols of heritage and identity. The use of traditional materials and techniques in construction, pottery, and weaving not only fulfills functional needs but also reinforces the cultural continuity of African societies. These technologies are passed down through generations, ensuring that local knowledge is preserved and adapted to changing circumstances.

### **Barriers to the Recognition and Integration of Indigenous Technologies**

Despite their sustainability and cultural importance, indigenous technologies face considerable barriers to recognition within modern development paradigms. The prioritization of modern technological innovations, often imported from industrialized nations, has led to the marginalization of traditional knowledge systems (Duncan, 2021). This oversight not only diminishes the perceived value of indigenous practices but also hinders efforts to develop sustainable and inclusive development strategies. The failure to integrate indigenous technologies into broader development frameworks represents a missed

opportunity to harness local knowledge in addressing global challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation.

Efforts to bridge this gap between indigenous knowledge and modern science could lead to more effective and contextually appropriate solutions. Collaborative approaches that combine indigenous technologies with scientific research offer the potential to develop innovations that are both culturally respectful and environmentally sustainable. For example, incorporating indigenous water management techniques into modern agricultural systems could enhance resilience to climate variability, particularly in regions facing water scarcity. Indigenous agricultural systems and technologies are integral to both the environmental sustainability and cultural identity of African communities. These systems, developed through centuries of adaptation to local ecological and social contexts, offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary challenges such as food insecurity, biodiversity loss, and climate change. However, the increasing pressures of industrial agriculture, land grabbing, and climate change threaten the survival of these practices.

The path forward requires a greater recognition of the value of indigenous knowledge within modern development frameworks. By integrating traditional practices into broader agricultural and technological strategies, societies can promote ecological balance, preserve cultural heritage, and enhance the resilience of local communities. The sustainability and adaptability of indigenous systems provide a powerful model for addressing the interconnected challenges of environmental degradation, food security, and social cohesion in a rapidly changing world.

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous African systems encompassing traditional medicine, agriculture, and technology are integral to the cultural and social fabric of communities across the continent. These systems embody a wealth of knowledge and practices honed over generations, reflecting the adaptability and resilience of African societies. Traditional medicine serves not only as a vital healthcare resource but also as a cornerstone of cultural identity, deeply intertwined with local ecological and spiritual contexts. Similarly, indigenous agricultural practices are instrumental in ensuring food security, preserving biodiversity, and fostering environmental sustainability, while indigenous technologies demonstrate innovative approaches grounded in ecological stewardship.

Despite their immense significance, these systems face substantial challenges in the modern era. Globalization, industrialization, and climate change exert relentless pressure on traditional practices, while the dominance of Western medicine, industrial farming methods, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge further threaten their survival. Land grabbing, deforestation, and environmental degradation exacerbate these vulnerabilities, undermining the livelihoods and cultural heritage of indigenous communities.

To confront these challenges, it is imperative to recognize the intrinsic value of indigenous knowledge and integrate it into contemporary development strategies. Such integration fosters sustainable progress while empowering local communities to preserve and adapt their traditions. Bridging the divide between traditional practices and modern scientific approaches can yield innovative, contextually relevant solutions that promote environmental sustainability and cultural continuity. The preservation and advancement of indigenous

African systems are not merely cultural imperatives but essential components of sustainable development. Valuing and incorporating these systems into broader frameworks enhances community resilience, promotes ecological balance, and enriches cultural diversity across the continent. Moreover, their survival offers global insights into sustainable practices, contributing to a more inclusive and holistic understanding of development in an interconnected world.

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