

# **MEDICINAL PLANTS AND HEALING PRACTICES AMONG THE ANNANG PEOPLE: ETHNOBOTANICAL PERSPECTIVES AND WESTERN CHALLENGES.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Annang society, like many African communities, possesses a rich heritage of traditional healing practices established in a holistic understanding of health, wholeness, and human flourishing. Despite the increasing dominance of Western medical systems, the Annang people continue to rely on plant-based remedies that address physical, spiritual, and psychosocial dimensions of illness. These practices are sustained by an indigenous worldview in which sickness is seen not just as a biological malfunction but as a disruption of harmony between the individual, the community, the environment, and the spiritual realm. This paper examined the role of medicinal plants in Annang traditional healing, drawing on oral interviews, ethnobotanical knowledge, and contemporary phytochemical researches. Employing historical and descriptive methods, the study situated Annang plant-based healing within its historical and religious context and juxtaposed it with the Western biomedical model introduced through colonial and missionary enterprises. The findings of the study revealed that while Western medicine offers precision and technological sophistication, it often neglects the spiritual and communal dimensions that are central to Annang notions of well-being. The study demonstrated that many plants used by Annang healers, such as *edem Ididout*, *Etinkene/Odusa*, *ntong*, *Nkimenang* and *etebe-owo inua*, possess scientifically validated therapeutic properties, underscoring the empirical value of indigenous knowledge. It argued that the erosion of traditional medical systems due to Western influence and other anthropogenic factors poses significant threats not only to cultural identity but also to biodiversity conservation, as many medicinal plant species are sourced from the

natural environment. The paper concluded that preserving Annang traditional healing practices is both a cultural imperative and an ecological necessity.

**Key words:** Medicinal Plants, Healing, Ethnobotany, Western, Annang People.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional medicine remains a vital component of healthcare across African societies, particularly in communities where indigenous knowledge systems continue to shape perceptions of illness, healing, and human well-being. Among the Annang people of Akwa Ibom State, plant-based healing practices constitute a longstanding therapeutic tradition founded on a holistic worldview (Jonathan, Ekanem and Oko, 2024). Health, expressed in the Annang saying *nchong idem edi ujai* (“sound health is beauty”), is understood as a state of harmony between the body, spirit, environment, and community. Illness, therefore, is often interpreted both as a biological disturbance as well as a disruption of spiritual or social balance, requiring remedies that address multiple dimensions of human experience. Medicinal plants play a central role in this healing system. Leaves, roots, barks, and seeds are used to treat conditions ranging from malaria, typhoid, leukemia, sickle cell disease (Edem, Olusakin and Essien, 2025) and skin infections to reproductive disorders and spiritually attributed afflictions.

The knowledge of these plants is transmitted through oral tradition, apprenticeship, and communal practice, positioning traditional healers as custodians of both medical and cultural heritage. These plants were very potent in addressing the health challenges of the people prior to the incursion of the Western medical practices (Nana, 2022). However, the spread of Western biomedicine during the colonial and missionary eras introduced a healthcare model that frequently dismissed indigenous healing as unscientific, creating tensions that persist today. In

addition to these cultural challenges, environmental degradation poses a significant threat to the availability of medicinal plants. Deforestation, urban expansion, and unsustainable harvesting endanger both biodiversity and the continuity of Annang healing traditions. This study therefore examines the role of plants in Annang traditional medicine and explores threats to these plants in the contemporary time. It argues for the preservation of indigenous medical knowledge and sustainable use of plant resources as essential pathways toward holistic health and environmental stewardship.

### **Brief Overview of the Annang People**

Essien (2020) rightly observes that to understand any people's worldview or practice, one must first understand who the people are. In keeping with this assertion, it becomes necessary to provide a brief account of the history and culture of the Annang people as a foundational step toward appreciating their perceptions and practices, particularly in relation to the subject under consideration. It bears mentioning that the history of the Annang people in Nigeria has been a contentious topic due to the lack of precise historical narratives and written documentation. In line with this, Ekanem (2002) observes that very little is known about the origin of the Annang, a gap which has inevitably opened the door to various speculations and competing theories. Despite these challenges, early scholars attempted to trace Annang origins. Jefferey, (cited in Edem and Udom 2024), maintains that the Annang people have always inhabited their present homeland. This position suggests an autochthonous origin, implying that the Annang did not migrate from elsewhere but are indigenous to their current geographical location.

However, linguistic and comparative cultural studies have produced alternative perspectives. Udo (1983), for instance, firmly argues that the Annang constitute a sub-group of the Ibibio, sharing a common history and similar cultural features. His argument rests on the

observable and extensive similarities between both groups, which in his view are too significant to be explained away by mere inter-group contact. Udo maintains that the portrayal of Annang as a distinct ethnic group from the Ibibio emerged largely for economic and political motives. Other scholars have presented contrasting views. Ukpong (2007) posits that the Ibibio, inclusive of the Annang, migrated from the Central Benue Valley but arrived in their present locations through different routes. In a more divergent account, Ineme and Udondata (2014) attribute Annang ancestry to Bantu warriors and Zulu hunters from Central Africa and argue that their migratory pattern was different from that of Ibibio stocks. For Ntebono, Oko, Olusakin & Ahamuefule (2025:337), “the Annang man is not excluded from the story of the Origin of man but remains an integral part of the story of creation and origin of man. Thus, he is created in the image of God Himself and is always in search to know more of God with a desire to be with Him”. This view reinforces the notion of Annang as a distinct cultural group, yet linked with humanity. From the foregoing, it is clear that there is no scholarly consensus on Annang origins. Geographically, the Annang occupy the western part of Akwa Ibom State in the South-South region of Nigeria. The area is characterized by low-lying plains, humid tropical climate, and dense vegetation that supports palm wine trees and other forest resources. The Annang share boundaries with the Isuogbo Igbo, Ngwa, Ndoki, and Ibibio peoples, which historically facilitated socio-cultural contact and economic interaction. Economically, the Annang have traditionally engaged in subsistence agriculture, fishing, and local trade, occupations that sustain their livelihood and strengthen communal interdependence. Culturally, the Annang are known for their rich expressive traditions, including music, dance, wood carving, and sculpture.

Religion occupies a central place in the Annang worldview. Ekandem (2018) points out that early missionaries and Western anthropologists once argued that Africans had no concept of

a Supreme Being or religion at all. This perspective, however, has long been corrected by more accurate and culturally sensitive research. In the case of the Annang people, their worldview, like that of many African communities, is profoundly shaped by religion. Religion forms the heartbeat of Annang culture and the framework through which the people understand life, death, morality, and community. They believe in a Supreme Deity known as *Awasi Ibom*, as well as divinities, ancestral spirits, and *Aruru* (spiritual forces) that influence human life. Their religious practices blend devotion, ritual observance, morality, and communal participation. Traditional Annang society, like other African societies, was regulated by well-defined social and judicial institutions that maintained order, enforced norms, and promoted communal stability. According to Ekanem, Essien, and Okon (2022), these institutions include *Ekpo*, *Ekpe*, *Ekong*, *Obon*, *Inam*, *Ebre*, *Ewana*, *Idiung*, *Ukang*, among others. Each institution contributed uniquely to governance, discipline, moral instruction, and conflict resolution.

### **Conceptualization of Sickness and Healing in Annang Culture**

The Annang understanding of health rests on a worldview in which human existence carries inherent value even in the presence of suffering. Within this frame, health does not imply the total absence of illness but draws its significance from the contrast that illness provides. This paradox shapes the Annang conception of health. The expression *Nchong idem edi ujai* (“Sound health is beauty”) conveys the belief that wellness constitutes an essential and cherished component of meaningful living. Health (*nchong idem*) is also articulated in the proverb *nchong idem edi imo*, meaning “health is wealth,” which conveys a holistic sense of wellbeing that includes strength, vigour, and social harmony. Wholeness, therefore, is not simply physical fitness but an integrated state touching every dimension of life. Although the Annang value wellness, there is a clear recognition that illness remains an unavoidable aspect of human

experience. Annang society, like many communities in Nigeria, perceives sickness as a disruption of the harmony an individual ought to enjoy internally, environmentally, and socially. Illness represents a deviation from the ideal state of balance. Within the Annang religio-cultural worldview, its causes vary widely. Some ailments are believed to result from malevolent spiritual forces, while others stem from personal actions or the ill-will of others.

This is in congruence with the submission of Olusakin (2022) that in traditional societies in Africa, illness is not just natural but its occurrence is always attributed to an enemy, evil forces like magic, witchcraft, and sorcery (Olusakin, 2013, 2014). Ekanem (2015) adds that majority of the illness in Anangland is believed to be actions of environmental spirits, witchcraft, sorcerers and ancestral spirits. Regardless of the supposed cause, sickness evokes deep concern, often greater than the fear of death itself. This heightened apprehension is captured in the proverb *Kukere mkpa nte udöngö* (“Do not be worried about death as you should be worried about sickness”). This proverb illustrates the community’s greater anxiety over prolonged suffering than over life’s conclusion. Udo, (cited in Agbiji and Landman 2014), attributes this to the protracted and debilitating nature of illness, which inflicts pain on the body, mind, and spirit, whereas death abruptly ends suffering and may even be accompanied by a sigh of relief from the afflicted. This shows that sickness is viewed as a prolonged ordeal, whereas death marks the cessation of distress.

Yet despite the severity of suffering that illness can bring, the Annang hold a firm moral stance against suicide or euthanasia. Taking life, one’s own or another’s, is unacceptable within Annang culture because life belongs to the Supreme Being not to humans. The value placed on life compels individuals to endure suffering with dignity rather than seek to terminate existence prematurely. Instead of surrendering, the Annang respond to illness by actively resisting the

forces perceived to threaten life, maintaining that “no challenge is insurmountable and sees every trials and difficulties (sickness inclusive) as part of life believing that with those challenges one is enabled to face the future” (Ntebono et al, 2025:338). As Agbiji and Landman (2014:56) note, the Annang people “engage with the forces against life to sustain their perception of wholeness and health.” This reveals a worldview in which human beings participate in maintaining the integrity of their existence, affirming health not as a static condition but as a continuous pursuit grounded in spiritual, physical, and communal resilience.

### **Plants in Traditional Healing in Annang Culture**

Plant-based medicine has long constituted a central component of Annang healing practices. This system rests on extensive knowledge of the therapeutic qualities of local flora, preserved through oral tradition, practical training, and communal experience. Medicinal plants are used to treat a wide spectrum of ailments, from minor infections to serious illnesses, and the belief persists that the appropriate plant, properly prepared, can relieve or cure disease (Umoh, 2011). Leaves, roots, and bark are employed in forms such as decoctions, infusions, poultices, and topical applications, each prepared to extract properties understood to reside in distinct parts of the plant. Medicinal plants are also valued for their spiritual functions. Certain species are regarded as protective or purifying and are used to repel harmful forces, restore balance, and cleanse individuals or spaces. Mrs. Akon Muffat (personal communication, February 29, 2025), a healer from Ikpe Ikot Akwa in Etim Ekpo, notes that plants such as Ekiko (African swizzle stick, Apocynaceae) and Utinewa (Velvet sunfruit) are incorporated into rituals that safeguard participants and remove negative influences. These practices illustrate the holistic nature of Annang healing, where physical, spiritual, and mental wellbeing are interwoven.

Traditional healers function as custodians of this knowledge. Their expertise, gained through apprenticeship or inherited instruction, encompasses plant identification, preparation methods, appropriate timing of use, and the guidance they offer on conduct, diet, and spiritual posture (Etuk, 2016). The plants employed in Annang medicine are sourced from forests, farmlands, and riverbanks rich in diverse species. While some, such as *Ntoniku* (scent leaf) and *Aditan* (*Lasianthera*), are cultivated, others, *Afadiban* (prickly hibiscus) and *Nsukakara* (hog plum), are gathered from the wild. Effective harvesting demands knowledge of location, season, and condition, ensuring sustainable use and the continuity of traditional expertise. Traditional plant healing, therefore, remains a vital part of Annang cultural heritage. The preservation and transmission of this botanical knowledge enable the community to address both physical afflictions and spiritual concerns, sustaining a medical tradition rooted in generations of lived experience. Below is a single, merged, shorter, and well-blended version of both sections under one heading. It keeps the scholarly tone, major citations, and core arguments while reducing word count and removing repetition.

### **Plants and their Therapeutic Functions in Annang Healing System**

There are various medicinal plants whose herbs, roots and barks have proven very useful and potent in the treatment of diseases or ailments in Annang land. For instance, Mr. Fabian Dominic Ita (personal communication, January 28, 2025) explained the medicinal significance of various plants in the region. Among them, he highlighted *mbara ekpe*, commonly referred to as mountain thistle and scientifically identified as *Asystasiagangetica*, as a potent remedy for skin infections such as chicken pox and eczema (*ikanganyong/ekpo mfem*). According to him, when the entire plant is pounded and the resulting milky pulp is applied directly to the affected skin, the infections clear rapidly. Modern phytochemical studies on *Asystasia gangetica* provide a

scientific basis for this traditional practice. The plant is known to contain a rich blend of bioactive compounds, including flavonoids (such as quercetin, luteolin, and kaempferol), phenolic acids, tannins, saponins, alkaloids, terpenoids, glycosides, and phytosterols (Adrian, 2009).

These constituents of *Asystasia gangetica* are known for their antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and wound-healing properties. Flavonoids and phenolic compounds, for instance, play crucial roles in neutralizing free radicals, reducing oxidative stress, and moderating inflammatory responses in the skin. Saponins and tannins exhibit antimicrobial effects by disrupting microbial cell membranes and forming protective layers on the skin surface, thereby preventing secondary infections and promoting faster healing. Terpenoids and plant steroids further enhance tissue repair by stabilizing cell membranes and reducing inflammatory swelling, while glycosides and alkaloids contribute to immune modulation and pain relief (Owen, 2017). Collectively, these compounds create a synergistic pharmacological action that combats microbial invasion, soothes inflammation, and accelerates skin regeneration. Therefore, the traditional method of pounding and applying the pulpy milk of *mbara ekpe* essentially delivers a natural blend of these bioactive agents directly onto the affected area, providing both curative and protective effects.

Relatedly, Mr. Dominic Ita further explains that *ajim ekpo* (*Allium cepa*) performs similar healing functions to the aforementioned *mbara ekpe* (*Asystasia gangetica*). In traditional Annang medicine, onions are valued for their potent antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties, which modern phytochemical studies attribute to the presence of sulfur-containing compounds such as *allicin*, *alliin*, and allyl propyl disulfide (Egbuonu and Opar, 2017). These bioactive constituents have been scientifically proven to inhibit bacterial growth, enhance wound healing,

and reduce inflammatory responses on the skin. When applied topically or ingested, *Allium cepa* facilitates the cleansing of infected tissues and promotes rapid recovery, validating its use as a natural antibiotic and skin restorative agent within Annang traditional healing practices.

Similarly, Mr. Okon Essien Udoфia (personal communication, January 29, 2025) describes the therapeutic use of *Okono*, botanically identified as *Dracaena arborea*, in the treatment of gonorrhea within Annang society. According to him, the roots are crushed and macerated in local gin or soda water and allowed to stand for several hours. The resulting extract is taken orally three times daily, leading to recovery within a short period. Although this practice appears empirical, scientific studies on *Dracaena arborea* lend strong support to its efficacy. The plant has been shown to contain biologically active compounds such as saponins, flavonoids, tannins, alkaloids, and glycosides, which possess antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, and immune-modulatory properties capable of combating *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, the causative agent of gonorrhea (Lawal, Uzokwe, & Igboanugo, 2010).

Further pharmacological evidence indicates that saponins and flavonoids present in *Dracaena arborea* enhance urinary tract cleansing and reduce inflammatory discomfort commonly associated with sexually transmitted infections. Davidson (2019) similarly reports that species within the *Dracaena* genus exhibit antimicrobial and therapeutic effects against bacterial infections, including gonorrhea and staphylococcal infections. The synergistic action of these bioactive constituents enables the root extract to function both as an antimicrobial agent and a natural detoxifier. This convergence of indigenous knowledge and scientific validation demonstrates that the continued use of *Okono* in Annang ethno-medicine is not merely traditional but rests on demonstrable pharmacological foundations, similar to other medicinal plants such as *Allium cepa* employed within the same cultural context.

Similarly, Andrews (2011) has shown that plants in the *Dracaena* genus often possess properties that align with their medicinal uses, such as antimicrobial activity. According to him, *Dracaena arborea* contains saponins and other compounds that act as antimicrobial agents, which may explain the efficacy in treating bacterial infection such as gonorrhea. Therefore, the traditional healing remedy described for the treatment of gonorrhea using *akoro* root by the Annang traditional healers is in congruence with scientifically recognized practices of using the plants which is believed to have antimicrobial properties to treat bacterial infections. Mrs. Elizabeth Ukpong (personal communication, January 28, 2025), detailed the role of plants in maternal and neonatal care. In an interview, she stated: "For generations, we have used herbs like *Urut nwanidip* (*Sida acuta*) and *Etoafai* (*Distermonanthus benthamianus*) to aid difficult childbirth and speed up postpartum recovery.

Explaining the preparation, Mrs. Ukpong notes thus: "the leaves of these plants are boiled in water or fresh palm wine and given to women in labour, while the bark can be used for treating infections that arise after childbirth. We also use *Afuo* (*Baphianitida*) for fever in newborns and mothers recovering from delivery." In addition to maternity care, medicinal plants play a crucial role in treating infectious diseases such as malaria and typhoid. Mr. Effiong Akpan Udoata (personal communication, January 30, 2025), a well-known herbalist from Ikot Otu, elaborated on the therapeutic uses of several medicinal plants commonly employed in the Annang traditional healing system. To treat *utoeyin* or *utoeyin ekpo* (malaria and typhoid), he explained that a potent herbal mixture is prepared using *Nyanyaha* (*Cymbopogon citratus*, commonly known as lemongrass) and *Udiaedi* (*Carica papaya*, papaya leaves). These two plants are boiled together, and the resulting bitter decoction is consumed by the patient, often yielding faster relief than some modern pharmaceutical drugs. In severe cases of malaria or typhoid,

*Ebenmbakara* (*Persea americana*, avocado leaves) is sometimes added to the preparation to increase its potency.

Modern phytochemical and pharmacological findings substantiate the traditional belief on the medicinal benefits of lemongrass, papaya leaf and avocado leaf. *Cymbopogon citratus* contains bioactive compounds such as *citral*, geraniol, and limonene, which possess antipyretic, antimicrobial, and strong *antiplasmodial* properties effective against *Plasmodium falciparum*, the causative agent of malaria (Abubakar and Musa, 2010). *Carica papaya* leaves, on the other hand, are rich in alkaloids (*carpaine*), flavonoids, phenols, and tannins, which contribute to their antimalarial, antityphoid, and immune-boosting effects. Studies have demonstrated that papaya leaf extracts can reduce parasitic load, enhance platelet production, and protect against oxidative stress, which supports the Annang healer's claim of its effectiveness in treating malaria and typhoid. When *Persea americana* leaves are included, their high content of flavonoids, saponins, and phytosterols provides additional antioxidant and hepatoprotective benefits, strengthening the body's ability to fight infection and recover faster (Otsuki and Kondo, 2010).

For skin infections, Mr. Udoata further noted that the bark of *Okoneyo* (*Cassia podocarpa*) mixed with *Mbriteim* (bush cane) is used as a topical or oral preparation. Cassia species are widely known for their antimicrobial, antifungal, and anti-inflammatory effects, largely due to anthraquinones, flavonoids, and tannins. These compounds inhibit bacterial growth, promote wound healing, and reduce itching and irritation associated with skin infections (Adaramoye and Lawal, 2015). The synergy between these plant materials not only underscores the empirical wisdom of Annang herbal medicine but also aligns closely with contemporary pharmacognostic evidence demonstrating the therapeutic potential of these species in the management of infectious and febrile illnesses.

Another important medical plant whose potency cannot be overemphasized is *utasi* (*Gongronema latifolium*). For Mr. Ime Akpan Udokorok (personal communication, January 28, 2025), if the leaves of *utasi* is boiled, used in alcohol or even macerated in water to make infusion for someone suffering from diabetes, if the person takes the infusion for two to three weeks the disease will be totally cured. In order to buttress the submission of Mr. Udokorok, it was expedient to examine the studies conducted by scholars on the effects of *utasi* (*Gongronema latifolium*) in healing diabetes. For instance, a study conducted by Dawson (2011), published in the *African Journal of Traditional, Complementary, and Alternative Medicines*, examined the effects of *Gongronema latifolium*(*Utasi* leaves) on hyperglycemia. The researcher found that *Utasi* extracts significantly reduced blood sugar levels in diabetic rats. The plant's active compounds were believed to act as hypoglycemic agents, potentially enhancing insulin secretion or sensitivity.

Another medicinal plant used widely by traditional healers in Annang land is *nkarika ikot*(bush banana, botanically known as *Uvaria chamae*). Mr. Etim Mbang (personal communication, January 26, 2025), notes the use *nkanika ikot* in the treatment of diarrhea and internal bleeding in Annangland and other places in Akwa Ibom State. In his opinion, when the roots of the plant are crushed and boiled either in water or native palm wine or macerated in soda water to make an infusion for a person suffering from diarrhea or internal bleeding. After two weeks of consistent usage, the diseases will inadvertently disappear. In a similar fashion Edet Bassey (personal communication, January 28, 2025) explicates the metaphysical power and curative potency of *ekiko root*(sausage Tree)?(*Rauwolfia vomitoria*). According to him, the roots have the power of healing mental illness and malaria. On the method of administration, Bassey explains that the roots have to be boiled in water and kept till the next day. On the morning of the

next day, the person suffering from the two illnesses mentioned above will have to take it first thing before eating. When that is done for two weeks, the problems will be solved.

In the same vein, Nkere Etim (personal communication, January 29, 2025), points out that *eto-afia* (*Distemonanthus benthamianus*) can be very instrumental and effective in treating chest and waist pains. This is achievable when the roots or the bark of the plant is cooked in water to make a decoction for a patient having the aforementioned illnesses. When the patient drinks it twice daily for one week, the pains will die a natural death.” In Annang society, *etebe-owo inua*, the local name for garlic, botanically known as *Allium sativum*, is regarded as a potent medicinal plant, especially in the treatment of low libido and weak erections. The therapeutic use of garlic has been a significant part of Annang traditional healing practices, and its effectiveness in addressing sexual health issues has been passed down through generations. According to Mfon Usoro (personal communication, January 28, 2025), a traditional healer in the community, *etebe-owo inua* (garlic), is commonly used for improving sexual desire and enhancing erectile function due to its natural properties that stimulate blood circulation and improve overall body vitality. The healing process often involves combining garlic with other plants to create a more powerful remedy.

In the preparation described by Usoro, five bulbs of garlic are combined with two bulbs of onion (*ajim*) and ten pieces of African red pepper (*ntuen*). These ingredients are crushed together, allowing the active compounds to be released, and are then mixed with water and honey to create a potent concoction. The combination of garlic, onion and red pepper is believed to work synergistically, each contributing its own healing properties, garlic for circulation, ginger for vitality, onion for its anti-inflammatory effects, and red pepper for stimulating the body’s systems. The treatment is administered by taking three tablespoons of the mixture three

times a day. Consistent use over two weeks is said to produce effective results, with noticeable improvements in libido and erectile strength.

From a medical perspective, garlic (*Allium sativum*) has indeed been shown to have several health benefits that corroborate its use in treating issues like low libido and erectile dysfunction (ED), as practiced in Annang society. Garlic has been extensively studied for its medicinal properties, and its effectiveness in improving sexual health can be attributed to several key components, particularly allicin, a sulfur-containing compound found in garlic. For instance, a study conducted by Osborne (2010) shows that garlic has vasodilatory effects, meaning it can help expand blood vessels and improve blood flow. This is critical in the treatment of erectile dysfunction. This is because adequate blood flow to the genital area is necessary for proper erection. Osborne also points out that garlic can help lower blood pressure, enhance circulation, and support overall cardiovascular health, which is directly linked to sexual function.

*Edem Ididout* (African blood tonic plant) is an indigenous plant commonly used in traditional healing practices in the Annang and wider Ibibio society. Its scientific name is *Eremomastax speciose*. This plant is widely known among local healers as a powerful remedy for blood-related conditions and sexual health. The plant is especially reputed for its role in treating erectile dysfunction, low libido, and even infertility, which are issues that many men and women face. Mr. Etim Bassey (personal communication, January 29, 2025), points out that *Edem Ididout* (*Eramomastax polysperma*) is effective in addressing not just erectile dysfunction, but also infertility ailments in general. As pointed out by Etim Bassey, the leaves of *Edem Ididout* are the primary part of the plant used in healing practices. The typical preparation involves washing the leaves thoroughly to remove dirt and contaminants, followed by squeezing them in water to extract the juice. According to Bassey's description, the juice is then administered orally

in dosages of six tablespoonsful twice daily. This regimen is typically followed for a period ranging from two to three weeks, with the aim of addressing the symptoms associated with erectile dysfunction, low libido, and infertility.

This method of preparation is characteristic of traditional practices, where the focus is on the fresh, potent compounds found in the plant itself. The infusion or juice is believed to retain the natural medicinal properties that help stimulate the body's healing processes. From a traditional standpoint, *Edem Ididout* is seen as a potent remedy for improving sexual function and fertility by acting on the reproductive system. The plant is believed to work by improving blood flow, increasing vitality, and stimulating hormonal balance. As already noted above, erectile dysfunction is often linked to poor blood circulation, hormonal imbalances, or underlying health conditions like diabetes and hypertension. Thus, plants like *Eremomastax polysperma* (*Edem Ididout*) that can promote circulation may actually help mitigate these issues, potentially aiding in the improvement of erectile function. Corroborating the utilization of *edemIdidout* in the treatment of erectile dysfunction and reproductive related issues by the Annang people, Morris (2011) notes that *Eremomastax speciose* (*edem Ididout*) contain phytochemicals with blood vessel-expanding effects, which help to increase blood flow to the reproductive organs. This can be essential in the treatment of erectile dysfunction, as it improves circulation and enables better erectile function.

Mr. Nkere Etim (personal communication, January 29, 2025) provides a different but equally valuable perspective on the treatment of impotency, focusing on the plant known as *Etinkene* (also called *Odusa* or Guinea black pepper in English). The plant is known botanically as *Piper guineense Schum* and it is a member of the *Piperaceae* family. Mr. Etimexplains that *Etinkene* has long been used in traditional medicine in Annang land for its potent therapeutic

effects, particularly in addressing male sexual health issues such as impotency. According to Mr. Etim, the root, leaves, and fruits of *Etinkene/Odusa* are believed to work in tandem to address impotency by enhancing circulation to the genital area, improving vitality, and supporting overall health. On the preparation, Etim notes that the plant can be prepared in several ways. The leaves and roots can be used to make a decoction, while a tincture (liquid extracts) can be prepared from the fruits and seeds. The decoction is made by boiling the leaves and roots of the plant, which extracts its medicinal compounds into the liquid. This decoction is then consumed by the patient, with a recommended dosage of half a glass cup of the brew taken daily.

In addition to the decoction, the tincture made from fruits and seeds is also an essential form of administration. The tincture is typically consumed in small doses, with one shot daily. This concentrated form allows the active compounds in the seeds and fruits to be absorbed efficiently into the body. The tincture is a more potent form of medicine compared to the decoction, as it extracts a higher concentration of the plant's medicinal properties. Mr. Etim further recommends that the treatment be administered for a period of at least three weeks to allow the body time to respond to the plant's healing effects. Consistency of use is important for ensuring that the body absorbs the full therapeutic benefits of the plant.

Furthermore, a traditional healer in Otoro Abak, Mr. Udoetuk Effiong (personal communication, January 30, 2025), explains that *ntong*, known in English as scent leaf and botanically as *Occimum basilicum* has been used over time in Annang land for the treatment of obesity, stomach ulcer, constipation. Mr. Effiong explained how the leaf of the plant is prepared and administered in the treatment of the aforementioned sicknesses. According to him, the leaves of *ntong* (*Ocimum basilicum*) can be prepared and administered in several ways. As noted by Mr. Effiong, the most common preparations include:

**Infusion for Obesity:** Fresh leaves are crushed and mixed with water. The resulting infusion is taken thrice daily, ideally before meals, to stimulate metabolism and promote weight loss.

**Decoction for Stomach Ulcers:** The leaves are boiled in water, and the liquid is consumed twice daily (morning and evening) to soothe the stomach lining and treat ulcers.

**Tincture or Decoction for Constipation:** The leaves are either boiled to create a decoction or steeped in water to make an infusion. This remedy is taken before bedtime to assist with bowel movements the following day.

This plant is largely consumed as meal, and it is used in the preparation of different food by the people. Therefore, *ntong* serves as an important medicinal plant within the Annang and broader Ibibio communities in Akwa Ibom State. The use of *ntong* in the treatment of the above mentioned diseases is backed by scientific researches. For example, Donald (2002) opines that scent leaf is known for its aromatic and medicinal qualities. According to him, the plant contains a wide range of bioactive compounds, including essential oils such as eugenol, which has anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and antioxidant properties. These properties make it particularly effective for addressing conditions like obesity, ulcers, and digestive issues. Additionally, Donald establishes that the leaves of the plant are rich in vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin C and calcium, which promote general bowel well-being.

Apart from treating physical ailments, plants in Annang traditional medicine also serve spiritual and protective functions. Annang believe that certain ailments are caused by supernatural forces, including curses, witchcraft, and malevolent spirits. To counteract these afflictions, herbalists and spiritual healers employ specific plants in rituals, purification ceremonies, and protective charms. Mrs. Akon Muffat shares her knowledge on the spiritual use

of plants thus: "Some sicknesses do not have a medical explanation. When a person suddenly falls sick after encountering an enemy, we suspect spiritual attack. In such cases, we use *uyayak* (*Tetrapleura tetrapterata*) to cleanse the body and ward off evil spirits. We also burn the leaves of *Nkimenang* (*Eleucine indica*) to drive away bad energy from home." Beside the aforementioned plants, there were many plants revealed by the traditional healers in the research locale and their therapeutic effects or medicinal values. For want of space, these plants and their therapeutic relevance are presented in the table below:

### Medicinal Plant Species Identified and Ailments Treated in Annang Land

Local Name	Common Name	Botanical Name	Part Used	Ailments cured
<i>Mbritem</i>	Bush cane	<i>Costus afer</i>	Stem, fruit, leave, root	Typhoid, sore throat, snake control
<i>Utimense</i>	Tridax	<i>Tridax procumbens</i>	Whole plant	Internal heat, malaria
<i>Atidot</i>	Bitter leaf	<i>Vernonia amygdalina</i>	Leaf or root	Stomach pains, heat
<i>Nyanyaha</i>	Lemon grass	<i>Cybopogon citratus</i>	Leaf	Malaria and Typhoid
<i>Ukwok</i>	Sand paper tree	<i>Ficus exasperate</i>	Leaf, root, bark	Hypertension, scabies, stomach disorder, urinary tract infections.
<i>Mongmong ikong</i>	Waterleaf	<i>Talinum triangulare</i>	Whole plant	Internal heat, stomach disorder
<i>Effiat</i>	Bitter kola	<i>Garcinia kola</i>	Root, bark, fruit	Boils, cough
<i>Uno</i>	Umbrella tree	<i>Musanga cercropioides</i>	Root, leaf, flower, juice	Head spinning, infertility, birth control
<i>Ntodikwod</i>	African deadnettle	<i>Solenostemon monstachyus</i>	Whole plant	Internal heat, rashes, malaria
<i>Efikisong</i>	False yam	<i>Icacinia trichanta</i>	Root, leaf	Impotency
<i>Ikpong ekpo</i>	Wild cocoyam	<i>Caladium bicolour</i>	Leaf	Malaria
<i>Ntuenibok</i>	Alligator pepper	<i>Aframomum mellegueta</i>	Seed	Cough, obesity
<i>Mbaraekpe</i>	False thistle, leopard tongue	<i>Acanthus montanus</i>	Whole plant	Boils, skin pills, fracture/dislocation.

<i>Ujajak</i>	Tetrapeura	<i>Tetrapleura tetraptera</i>	Fruit, bark	Skin disease, pneumonia.
<i>Afadiban</i>	<i>Pricky hibiscus</i>	<i>Hibiscus surathensis</i>	Whole plant	Stomach disorder

### **Western Influence and Threats to Annang Traditional Medicine**

The arrival of European missionaries and colonial officers in the 19th century brought a new medical orientation to Annang land. Thus, Ntebono, Oko, Olusakin & Ahamuefule (2025:30) asserts, “the Catholic Church in Ikot Ekpene Diocese is not only concerned with the preaching of the goodnews, and teaching but is concerned with the total well being of the people, delving into the provision of healthcare and social services, hospital and dispensaries....” Before this period, the Annang, like most African societies, already possessed functional systems of healing rooted in plant medicine, spirituality, and communal care. Although imperfect, these systems effectively addressed local health needs. Missionaries, however, introduced Western education, hospitals, and scientific diagnostic methods, laying the foundation of modern medical practice in Nigeria (Udo, 2010). Their holistic blend of pastoral and medical care produced notable successes, with diseases such as smallpox, malaria, dysentery, and hookworm responding positively to treatment (Aye, 2016). These achievements quickly enhanced the popularity of the biomedical model in Annang society.

Over time, Western medicine began to assume what Usoro (2020) describes as an “illusion of omnipotence,” leading practitioners to marginalize indigenous healing methods viewed as unscientific or superstitious. The Western model, centered on quantification, diagnosis, and measurable cure, prioritized “treatment” and “cure” over “healing,” a term strongly associated with spirituality and ritual (Udo, 2010). This exclusion of the spiritual

dimension conflicted with the Annang worldview, in which sickness is both physical and metaphysical. Consequently, many Annang people continued to rely on prayer, rituals, and herbal medicine, especially for chronic or unexplained illnesses. Umoren's (2019) hospital-based study confirms this trend: over half of his 389 respondents believed that cancer and stroke required spiritual intervention or traditional medicine alongside, or in place of, orthodox care.

The dismissive posture of Western-trained physicians contributed to the gradual relegation of Annang traditional medicine. Yet, despite criticism from missionaries, colonial authorities, and modern medical practitioners, indigenous healing remains widely used, particularly where Western medicine seems inadequate or inaccessible. The failure of the biomedical model to meet the holistic health expectations of the Annang people, addressing body, spirit, and community together, has ensured the survival of traditional practices. However, the continuity of Annang traditional medicine faces new challenges from environmental and cultural transformations that threaten medicinal plant diversity. The survival of ethnobotanical knowledge depends on access to forests, sacred groves, and ecological zones where medicinal species naturally grow. Deforestation, driven by farming expansion, logging, charcoal production, and urbanization, has destroyed many of these habitats.

As Sofowora (2008) notes, many medicinal plants are habitat-specific; once their microclimate is disturbed, they disappear. In Annang communities, this loss has made certain roots and barks used in ritual cleansing, postpartum care, and spiritual protection increasingly scarce, thereby weakening the apprenticeship system through which knowledge is transmitted. Unsustainable harvesting further accelerates plant depletion. With rising demand for herbal products, collectors increasingly uproot entire plants or debark trees fully, practices that Iwu (1993) and Onwukaeme (1995) warn are ecologically destructive. Traditional ethical rules, such

as harvesting only mature plants or taking partial roots, are fading with cultural change, resulting in rapid reduction of formerly abundant species. Environmental pollution from oil-related activities in parts of Akwa Ibom State presents another serious threat. Studies by Udoh and Etuk (2010) show that soil and water contamination alters plant chemistry, diminishing potency and increasing toxicity.

Cultural shifts also endanger plant diversity. As younger generations embrace Western medicine and modern lifestyles, fewer people cultivate medicinal plants in home gardens or observe taboos that once protected sacred groves, key reservoirs of rare species (Essien and Udoh, 2011). Former herbal gardens are now replaced by paved compounds and ornamental plants, undermining local conservation traditions. Thus, while Western medicine reshaped health-seeking behaviour in Annangland, environmental degradation and cultural change now threaten the botanical foundation upon which indigenous healing depends. Protecting medicinal plant diversity is therefore essential not only for ecological sustainability but also for the survival of Annang cultural identity and its holistic health practices.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that Annang traditional healing practices, particularly the use of medicinal plants, constitute a rich and sophisticated system of healthcare that addresses both physical and spiritual dimensions of human well-being. The extensive knowledge demonstrated by Annang healers, passed down through generations, reveals a profound understanding of the therapeutic properties of plants. Far from being primitive or unscientific, many of these remedies are supported by contemporary phytochemical and pharmacological research, affirming the credibility and empirical value of indigenous medical knowledge. However, the increasing dominance of Western biomedicine, coupled with the rapid

degradation of natural habitats, has contributed to the marginalization of Annang ethnomedicine and the erosion of vital plant species used for healing. This disconnect between traditional and modern health systems not only threatens cultural heritage but also undermines biodiversity conservation. The Annang worldview, which sees health as a balance between body, spirit, and environment, offers a holistic perspective that modern healthcare systems often overlook. Therefore, there is a pressing need to preserve and integrate Annang traditional healing within contemporary health frameworks. Protecting medicinal plants, documenting indigenous knowledge, and encouraging respectful collaboration between traditional healers and biomedical practitioners are crucial steps toward sustainable healthcare.

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