



Religion, Gender, and the COVID-19 pandemic: Opportunities and opportunism in the use of herbal medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Unethical behaviours emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic have received limited attention in terms of research. During the COVID-19 pandemic, with imposed COVID-19 protocols, the general populace had to find genuine survival opportunities, particularly from Mother Earth. However, opportunistic tendencies also emerged, pitting them against genuine ways of survival. Unscrupulous businesspeople, both male and female, devised ways of making the most out of the tragic situation, among them herbalists who took advantage of the earth's pharmacy of natural herbs and fleecing mainly women who are the most caregivers in Zimbabwe. This opportunistic behaviour included the overpricing of essential commodities as well as the much sought-after indigenous herbal medicines. Unfortunately, such opportunistic behaviours cut across the gender divide, intersecting all sectors of society, including the church and other forms of religious worship. This article examines the different opportunities and opportunism Zimbabwe's herbal religious entrepreneurs, both men and women practiced in view of investigating how Zimbabwean culture was affected by such behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research is largely qualitative and utilises a sample of purposively selected entrepreneurs, both men and women, in African Indigenous religion in Harare's oldest high-density suburb of Mbare. The location was conveniently selected because it is Zimbabwe's most populous bus terminal. It is also the busiest in terms of numerous indigenous religious entrepreneurs who sell their herbal medicines at Mbare Musika. It is hoped that the opportunities and opportunism brought on by COVID-19 will be put under the spotlight to show how they both benefited and harmed Zimbabwean society. The study is informed by *Ubuntu/Unhu* philosophy, which implies being properly socialised in indigenous African culture that frowns on opportunism. The paper recommends that opportunism during pandemics exacerbates the challenges and difficulties faced by communities and proposes some mitigatory strategies that can be adopted to eliminate this culture and uphold the Zimbabwean culture of *Ubuntu*.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, opportunities, opportunism, African Indigenous Religion

Introduction



The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global scene provided a lot of opportunities for survival. However, in the same vein, the pandemic offered a new avenue for opportunism in the health sector around the globe. In Zimbabwe and other African countries, the use of “herbal medicine is the most popular form of medicine and has an immense contribution to health, particularly in resource-limited countries” (Gakuya et al., 2020). Though some might want to attribute the use of herbal medicines to limited resources, in this paper, we argue that the wide use of herbal medicines in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular is because of the close link between the African people’s life with Mother Nature. In African Indigenous Religion, there is an intricate connection between humans, nature, and spirituality, and all these live in harmony through ethical and responsible use of resources through taboos, myths, and legends that help to conserve the environment (Gudhlanga et al., 2022; Mukurazhizha et al. 2023). There is a close link between religio-gender and environmental interface, which makes it possible for people of African descent to always turn to Mother Nature for concrete solutions to problems that befall them, pandemics included. However, the emergence of COVID-19 did not only provide opportunities for the use of herbal medicines but also resulted in some opportunistic tendencies through unethical use of these medicinal resources provided by Mother Nature.

In the COVID-19 crisis, individuals and corporations saw an opportunity to make huge profits from this dire situation. Hart and Difelice (2022) have also observed this and aver that “when the pandemic hit and sent the economy into a tailspin, corporations and individuals saw an opportunity to make more and more profits from the people.” This article discusses the opportunities and opportunism in the use of herbal medicines in Zimbabwe during COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe.

Williamson (1993) defines opportunism as self-interest seeking which takes advantage of others where possible. He further avers that it does not necessarily break the law but violates morals and in this case takes advantage of the people in a pandemic. He further avers that opportunism destabilises collective good and benefits from situations for personal gain. Opportunistic tendencies are characterised by self-interest and lack of accountability. This unethical behaviour has received little attention in research but has been widely reported in the media. The article further argues that out of the opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, religious entrepreneurs of indigenous herbs found a way for opportunism, thereby making exorbitant profits at the advantage of the general populace.

The religious entrepreneurs who could access the most affordable herbal resources during COVID-19 were better placed to access resources and services out of this opportunity to better themselves and help others, but they then became greedy and made outrageous profits out of the pandemic. These sellers of herbal medicines became vultures who took the ‘opportunity’ in the context of the crisis to ‘feed’ on the unsuspecting populace through exorbitant pricing of herbs, unethical harvesting of the medicinal plants as well as mixing the herbs with other ingredients so that they make more profits at the expense of the consumer.

Ubuntu Theoretical Framework

Ubuntu theoretical framework is premised on ‘humanity through recognising the humanity of others’ (Samkange & Samkange, 1980) and creating a communal atmosphere that emphasises “kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa.” (Ramosé, 1991: 271). It is imperative to ground this paper on *ubuntu* because the opportunism that was exhibited by privileged Zimbabweans during COVID-19 would not have surfaced if Zimbabweans depended on the need for the collective action of society or family in treating as well as preventing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is pertinent to use *Ubuntu* because it proffers a way forward in which cultural norms can be used to curb opportunism in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (Gumbo & Gaotlhobogwe, 2021). We argue that despite possessing areas of challenge that need adjustments, good practices can be drawn from *ubuntu* (Manyonganise, 2023a). The theory is useful in curbing predatory tendencies in the use of indigenous herbal medicines in times of pandemics because it enables individuals to



be responsible towards their neighbours and the whole earth community (Madigele et al., 2024). And other forms of calamities in Zimbabwe and beyond. It is our contention that if *ubuntu* is fully embraced, the Zimbabwean community can continue to excel in managing pandemics using indigenous herbs where provision of conventional medicine is challenged.

Methodology and Fieldwork

This article adopted a qualitative methodology design, which made it possible to investigate opportunities and opportunistic tendencies by indigenous herbal entrepreneurs and consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was used to identify the research informants who benefited from the opportunities proffered by herbal medicines, as well as those who suffered from opportunistic tendencies of herbal sellers during COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. This type of sampling enabled the researchers to select participants regarded as data-rich sources (Cresswell, 2014). The researcher sampled five informal traders at Mbare Musika and five ordinary Zimbabweans who purchased herbs at Mbare Musika. It included an equal representation of participants by gender; this was done to get a representative view of both the opportunities and predatory tendencies experienced using indigenous herbal medicines during COVID-19 amongst Zimbabweans.

The sample size was determined by data saturation. Data was collected through in-depth, open-ended interviews with identified informants at Mbare Musika. The location was conveniently selected because it is the most populous and the largest bus terminal in Zimbabwe. It is also the busiest in terms of informal traders. The collected data unravels opportunities and opportunism brought on by COVID-19 and how they benefited as well as harmed Zimbabweans respectively. Ethical considerations were taken note of, and participants were guaranteed anonymity, informed consent, and freedom to pull out of the study whenever they felt like it. The paper formulated a coding system that signifies the gender and status of the interviewee; for example, FHS1 refers to the first female herbal seller to be an interviewee, while MHBA refers to the first male herbal buyer interviewee.

Fieldwork Findings and discussion

Opportunities provided by using indigenous herbs during COVID-19 in Zimbabwe

The findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe provided a lot of opportunities to earn a living out of the use of indigenous herbal medicines. The opportunities included new innovative research to extract the potency of various herbs to curb the spread of the virus, the revival of the use of Indigenous medicines in preventing and treating the pandemic, the increased use of technology in extracting the medicinal elements of Indigenous herbs, e-teaching, and e-commerce in the use of herbs. Thus, through the pandemic, some new avenues were created for people to earn a living by using and selling indigenous herbal medicines.

The informants stated that COVID-19 provided a great opportunity for making money through the sale of indigenous herbs. The cost of medical care in Zimbabwe is beyond the reach of many but with COVID-19 the situation worsened. Hospital admission fees skyrocketed, and the use of indigenous herbs became handy for the general populace who had become helpless but had to resort to indigenous methods of treatment. These herbs were harvested from the forest and found themselves a ready market in Zimbabwe's markets where they were greatly sought after. One female herbal seller had this to say concerning the sale of indigenous herbs:

COVID-19 is a great opportunity to make money for those who can harvest indigenous herbs such as *zumbani*, *mumvee* and *mutsine*. As you can see this vegetable market is full of prospective buyers of the herbal medicines that I sell. I have not put anything into these herbs, I only need the energy to go



and harvest them and then come and sell them. I am making very good money with minimal capital of harvesting the herbs (FHS1, 2023).

This adequately validates that many people earned a living through the sale of indigenous herbs during COVID-19. The pandemic opened some new opportunities for them to earn a living out of it.

All the 10 respondents that were interviewed, both herbal sellers and those who bought the herbs, concluded that the use of herbal medicines during COVID-19 provided alternative and easily accessible medical care to combat the pandemic. The male and female herbal entrepreneurs and consumers of the herbs cited several coping strategies provided using herbal medicines during COVID-19. All 10 respondents cited the use of Indigenous herbs such as *zumbani* for *kunatira* (steaming). Other home remedies the participants claimed to have used included the use of baobab coffee and *mutisine* (blackjack) tea for any colds associated with COVID-19 among other remedies. These herbs were used for steaming and opened airwaves and addressed respiratory challenges associated with COVID-19. The ones that were used as coffee provided the much-needed warmth and critical nutrients required by COVID-19 patients. *Zumbani* is easily available in the bushes and forests of most communities in Zimbabwe. One male herbal seller stated that having the *zumbani* herb was a solution to all COVID-19 related health problems (MHS1, 2023).

Apart from steaming, *zumbani* was also used for disinfecting the homes. Another man who used to come and buy *zumbani* from herbal sellers at Mbare Musika had this to say, “steaming using *zumbani* is the best because the COVID-19 virus cannot stand the high temperature of steaming. Steaming also sterilised the home environment. This is why we always come to buy *zumbani* because it is the *panacea* to all COVID-19 problems” (FMB1, 2023). Thus, both men and women used herbs in the same way to prevent and treat COVID-19. Respondents also stated that they also used indigenous herbal teas such as *makoni* and *mufandichimuka* (Resurrection) tea, which did not only curb COVID-19 but other terminal conditions like hypertension and heart problems. This exhibits that Mother Nature provide alternative medicines and promotes peaceful coexistence with humans within the earth community. Madongonda and Gudhlanga (2023) have also observed the use of indigenous herbs to treat COVID-19 in most Zimbabwean homes and aver that most Zimbabweans benefitted from the use of indigenous herbal medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the findings also reveal that COVID-19 revived the use of indigenous herbs. One female herbal seller said, “COVID-19 has resuscitated the use of long abandoned traditional herbs whose use has become so prominent in this pandemic” (FHS2, 2023). This was corroborated by one male herbal consumer who said, “Who ever knew that the long abandoned indigenous traditions and herbs that were looked down upon would one day save us. It is high time we embrace our indigenous herbs” (MHB1, 2023). This amply demonstrates the realisation of the importance of indigenous herbal medicines. The indigenous herbs had since been abandoned by indigenous people who had converted to Christianity.

The new religion, Christianity condemned indigenous herbs as demonic (Gakuya et al., 2020), leading to their abandonment. The COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to resuscitate the use of indigenous herbs provided by mother nature. In Africa, the use of indigenous herbs is closely linked to the African Indigenous Religion, which promotes responsible and ethical use of those herbs as well as conserving the environment. The study demonstrated that women are more informed than men about environmental management since they are more linked to Mother Nature. Thus, the traditions that indigenous people have abandoned and women’s knowledge about indigenous herbs help in regulating the ethical use and sustainable use of indigenous resources such as herbs, thereby promoting environmental conservation without experiencing heavy financial burdens in the process.



The findings have amply demonstrated that in Zimbabwe some genuine survival strategies were used in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. These included the selling of indigenous herbs such as *zumbani*, which was used as herbal tea as well as in steaming and greatly helped in preventing and treating COVID-19 (Madongonda & Gudhlanga, 2023). These herbal medicines were sold both physically and online by very enterprising Zimbabweans. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic revived the use of indigenous medicines as well as resuscitation of the easily available and affordable indigenous medicines. The use of herbal medicines had been relegated to the fringes of society with the onset of colonialism because of the newly acquired religion.

Christianity demonised all indigenous practises as fiendish and therefore had to be abandoned because they were not in tandem with the new beliefs. Furthermore, colonialism instituted laws which outlawed the use of herbal medicines. Gakuya et al. (2020) argue that in Kenya in 1925, the then-colonial government promulgated the Witchcraft Cap Act, which sought to outlaw the use of traditional medicine. They further aver that it was only in “1978 [that] the World Health Organisation began to urge its members to embrace traditional systems of medicine” (Gakuya et al., 2020). The emergence of COVID-19, therefore, expedited the use of indigenous medicines. This is because when Africans are hapless, they usually turn to solutions that emanate from their indigenous religion; even those who profess to be Christians in times of crises normally resort to African indigenous solutions.

Madongonda and Gudhlanga (2023) have also noted that COVID-19 provided an opportunity for genuine ways of survival by using easily accessible herbs that did not have bureaucratic tendencies to acquire them unlike the COVID vaccines which needed government approval to get them. This, in a way, eased the burden that was brought out by the pandemic. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new phenomenon in cross border trading called “a runner” in Zimbabwe (Gudhlanga, 2023). A runner is one who takes people’s orders and acquires the merchandise on people’s behalf from outside the country and brings it to Zimbabwe.

Globally, numerous treatises on the relationship between religion and COVID-19 exist, with scholars inclined to examine religious explanatory models of the disease and its impact on religious practices. This has been counterfactual, with immense scholarly attention devoted to analysing the impact of the pandemic on socio-economic variables (Isiko, 2022).

The previous section has established that the COVID-19 pandemic, has created some new avenues for people to genuinely earn a living as well as access health care by using indigenous herbs in a period where western conventional medicines had become impossible to access. However, like in any other situation, not everyone who seemed to help in curbing the spread of the pandemic was sincere. There was a lot of unethical behaviour which emanated from the predatory tendencies of those who were in privileged positions to access indigenous herbal medicines during the pandemic.

Opportunism, Opportunistic and Predatory tendencies

This section demonstrates the unprincipled or unethical behaviour exhibited by herbal entrepreneurs in the use of herbal medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. Sipeyiye (2024: 60) avers that the “Ndau indigenous knowledge systems can be both a source of resilience but can also pose a threat in containing and preventing the COVID-19 pandemic.” The findings established that those selling herbal medicines did not observe the traditional harvesting methods but became a threat to the community through opportunism. They simply harvested to make super profits without considering posterity. One female herbal seller had this to say:

We simply harvest and even uproot the *zumbani* herb. Where we used to get *zumbani* at the onset of COVID-19 is finished. We now travel longer distances than before to get the herb and in that new area it is also fast depleting



because most people who harvest for sale simply uproot and rush to the market to make huge profits. (FHS1, 2023)

This sufficiently establishes that the herbal medicines entrepreneurs did not regard the African indigenous methods of harvesting and conserving these herbs for future generations. Reckless harvesting of indigenous herbs was not only confined to Zimbabwe but was also experienced in some African countries like Kenya and Uganda. Gakuya et. al., (2020) aver that:

In African indigenous religions when harvesting herbs from the wild, these were not taken in bulk but just a little for the intended use without destroying the forest. The harvesting methods used during COVID-19 reveals the breakdown in traditional controls that regulate the use of natural resources. There was no respect for traditional taboos on conservation, no knowledge of the population of the plants they are using for medicinal purposes.

The neglect of indigenous methods of conservation has resulted in unethical harvesting of these indigenous herbs. Manyonganise (2023b) maintains that in African culture it was mainly women who were trained in the proper harvesting of the indigenous herbs. To further safeguard the earth community *ubuntu* fostered preservation of the environment. In Zimbabwe, traditionally community members were not allowed to fell down trees (Ngara & Mangizvo, 2013). Taboos and indigenous religious beliefs helped greatly in environmental conservation and making sure that forests were not depleted of these priceless indigenous medicines. Also, herbs and fruits were not harvested in bulk, which is what is happening now. In indigenous culture the herbs were not also supposed to be harvested for sale. Instead, they were only harvested in small quantities to assist those in need.

The advent of COVID-19 gave rise to “the emergence of quacks keen on profits with total disregard for conservation” (Gakuya et al. 2020). Unethical behaviours were prevalent within the extravagance and environmental extortion. One female herbal buyer had this to say: “The *mumvee* powder I bought here last week was mixed flour, but it was still sold at a very high price. I only noticed that when I got home and realised that the taste was different from the previous supply, I had bought from the market the previous week” (FHB2, 2023). *Mumvee* herb (Afrikaan Kigela), which has become so popular with cancer and other ailments such as COVID-19 respiratory infectors, is now being mixed with flour. This adequately exhibits that people have now embraced predatory tendencies and disregard saving human life but are concerned with making profits at the expense of human life. Yet, in African *ubuntu*, it is the responsibility of the stronger and better off to protect and provide the weak and vulnerable in society and not to extort them (Okyere-Manu & Morgan, 2022).

The use of herbs during COVID-19 likewise resulted in the selling of herbs and the treatment of patients with medicinal plants by non-professionals. In African culture and religion, it is not everyone who gave people herbs, but known traditional medical practitioners and herbalists had that role. The use of herbal medicines in Zimbabwe is spiritual, and the professionals would properly guide how these are supposed to be used as well as the spiritual aspect of the herb for it to work properly. Not everyone knew the use of herbs, it was a preserve for the few. The COVID-19 crisis disregarded the rich environmental African culture that guided the harvesting and use of herbs (Kanene, 2016) and knew very well that the slow-growing tree species were a priority for conservation (Cunningham, 1997: 123). Suddenly, every Jack and Gill had knowledge of these herbs and ended up selling them on the streets, disregarding the spiritual, the expertise and ecological conservation that comes with herbal utilisation.

The other form of opportunism which characterised the Zimbabwean society was the charging of exorbitant prices for herbal medicines that were believed to treat COVID-19. One male herbal buyer had this to say “The rate at which they inflate prices on indigenous herbs that treat COVID-19 is unbelievable. Can you imagine that just a bunch of *zumbani* is being sold for \$2 per bundle. These used to be simply harvested from the forests, and we used to get



them for free.” (MHB2, 2023). This was corroborated by another female herbal buyer who stated that: “I bought *mufandichimuka*, resurrection tea mixed with flour, only to realise that after getting to the next herbal seller that what I had bought was mixed with flour.” (FHB3, 2023). This demonstrates unethical behavior in which people now only focus on making profits by selling fake herbs and disregarding the greater good of humanity. The ethics of *ubuntu* suffered under colonialism which dismissed African knowledge systems and imposed western ones which were presumed universal and the best upon the colonised (Musili, 2024: 2). The capitalist tendency influences the formerly colonised to make super profits at the expense of others.

The findings thus have amply demonstrated that the use of herbal medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe has also brought in the aspect of opportunism used by individuals, public entities, and corporations that have predatory tendencies, vultures who pound on unsuspecting people and make a killing out of the situation. These opportunists or vultures also included the religious entrepreneurs who sell indigenous medicines. Opportunism is defined by Sobirova (2020: 25) as “the non-existence of sincerity and honesty in dealing, and the following of self-interest by cheating.” During the COVID-19 pandemic corporates, public entities, as well as, sellers of indigenous herbal medicines, used different types of opportunism to maximise their gains. The unscrupulous indigenous herbal sellers, therefore, are opportunists who took advantage of a situation to enrich themselves.

Gudhlanga (2024) also argues that the so-called opportunists or vultures in modern-day pandemics have used various strategies namely price-gouging, awarding lucrative contracts to well-connected corporates without proper procurement procedures, soliciting for bribes, and various forms of corruption among others. It is important to note that this unethical behaviour exhibited by these unethical people in times of pandemics is not confined to Africa alone but is a global phenomenon (Cuadrado, 2020, 2022; International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2020; Kafe, 2021; Madzianike, 2021; Johnson, 2020; Maulani, Wadeka & Wandeka, 2020).

Strategies to curb predatory tendencies in herbal use during crises

There is need to promote the use of indigenous philosophies in Zimbabwe such as *ubuntu* that promotes, respect and empathise for others. It encourages love and care for the other and is not restricted to blood relatives but can be extended to the community. Gumbo and Gaothlobogwe (2021: 464) contend that “the fight against COVID-19 requires a social system where the collective supersedes the individual and where interdependence is seen as a superior value to independence.”

The first possible strategy would be for the government to give traditional conservation methods the prominence they deserve for sustainable environmental conservation (Kanene 2016). The indigenous methods of conserving the environment can also be promoted. (Manyonganise & Museka, 2020: 68) state that “in pre-colonial Africa, women played a critical role in indigenous systems of environmental protection, because for them the environment guaranteed the existence of future generations.” It is not only in Zimbabwe where women take a leading role in environmental conservation but also among the Ikare-ikoko women also seem to be the only ones bearing this responsibility more than men (Adedoyini, 2021). The current environmental conservation strategies can tap from the traditional methods of sustaining the ecosystem.

Furthermore, there is need to rope in traditional leaders such as chiefs in the intervention strategy. The ethics of *ubuntu* promote respect for one another, and religious leaders included. Owusu-Ansah and Owusu Ansah (2021) have observed the importance of traditional leaders in orienting their members in making lifestyle changes that benefit the earth through promoting activities that support environmental development. Dube (2024) contend that to be human is



to understand that the earth community includes animals and fauna whose sanctity must be preserved. Accordingly, humans need to coexist with all the earth's community and thereby preserve the environment.

Additionally, there is a need to adopt a Training-of-Trainers model in training community leaders "on environmental ethics that promote moral interactions between humans and the environment as well as promoting the status of the environment" (Adedoyini, 2021: 46) who live with people in the community about the dangers of rampant destruction of vegetation in search of herbal remedies. There is also a need to demonstrate the importance of traditional religion and its taboos and totems which greatly assisted indigenous communities in conservation of the environment. The Training-of-Trainer model ensures sustainability because of its potential for up-skilling the workforce rapidly and economically (Momina & Pinder, 2018). The community members who would have been trained would train other members on the benefits of environmental conservation.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that even though the COVID-19 pandemic has brought some opportunities in the use of indigenous herbs in Zimbabwe, it has also brought some opportunism which fleeced hapless people during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has highlighted that the abandonment of African *ubuntu* in the general governance of the African people's affairs has provided a new avenue for predatory tendencies and opportunism in the use of herbal medicines in Zimbabwe. It further demonstrated that if Zimbabweans are guided by the *ubuntu* philosophy which encourages them to feel for the other person they will be able to avoid vulturism and opportunism as unethical behaviours and promote opportunities in any future crises that might befall the country. The use of *ubuntu* philosophy can present the African citizens several worthy morals that help to curb the opportunism prevalent in times of pandemics. It also makes it possible to promote the indigenous methods of conservation advocate environmentally friendly methods managing the ecosystem..

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