

**GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS VIS-A-VIS TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN ANAMBRA STATE**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, particularly his concepts of historical consciousness, language, and the fusion of horizons, in relation to traditional medicine and public health practices in Anambra State, Nigeria. It argues that Gadamer's emphasis on understanding through dialogical engagement offers a meaningful interpretive framework for reassessing the epistemological foundations and social legitimacy of indigenous healing systems. By situating traditional medicine within its cultural and historical context, the study reveals how local health practitioners embody a lived tradition that is not merely functional but deeply interpretive, responsive to communal values, and dialogical in its transmission of knowledge. Through qualitative analysis which includes interviews with traditional healers, ethnobotanical data, and hermeneutic reflection, the article contends that meaningful public health discourse in African contexts requires recognition of the dialogical interplay between modern biomedical paradigms and indigenous worldviews. This interpretive integration, guided by Gadamerian thought, challenges the epistemic marginalization of traditional medicine and suggests a path toward a more inclusive, culturally rooted health system in Anambra State, Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Gadamer, hermeneutics, traditional medicine, Anambra State, public health, fusion of horizons, epistemology, healthcare pluralism.

**Introduction**

Traditional medicine in Anambra State, Nigeria, remains an indispensable component of public health, deeply interwoven with cultural identity, spiritual belief systems, and community-based healthcare practices. In many communities across the state, traditional healers, herbalists, and diviners continue to provide primary health services, especially in rural areas where access to orthodox healthcare is limited (Okoro, 2020). These indigenous practices encompass not only herbal pharmacology but also rituals, spiritual diagnoses, and culturally embedded narratives of illness and healing. Despite its widespread usage and sociocultural relevance, traditional medicine in Anambra, as in many parts of Africa, has historically been marginalized within national health structures and dismissed by dominant biomedical paradigms (Owolabi, 2016).

This marginalization calls for a critical, philosophical engagement that recognizes the interpretive and historically grounded nature of traditional medical knowledge. This gives an insight into what public service in Anambra State, nay, Nigeria is like. According to Nweke and Nwoye, public service in Nigeria is an apology of what it should be. Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics offers a compelling model for such engagement. Central to Gadamer's thought is the idea that understanding is not a methodological act but a dialogical and historically mediated process. His key concepts such as the "fusion of horizons," the role of tradition, and the centrality of language in interpretation emphasize the situatedness of all knowledge and the necessity of openness to the Other (Gadamer, 2004). These ideas present a powerful perspective through which the epistemic and cultural significance of traditional medicine in Anambra can be understood and appreciated.

The objective of this article is to apply Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy to the study of traditional medicine and public health in Anambra State. Through this approach, the article seeks to illuminate how indigenous healing

practices constitute a coherent and meaningful worldview that must be interpreted within its cultural and historical context rather than judged by external biomedical standards. This interpretive orientation does not aim to idealize traditional medicine but rather to foster a more dialogical and respectful engagement between biomedical and indigenous health systems. In doing so, it underscores the need for culturally grounded public health policies that recognize and incorporate the lived traditions and local knowledge systems of the communities they intend to serve.

Understanding the historical and cultural embeddedness of traditional medicine is not merely of academic interest but of practical importance for contemporary health policy. By acknowledging the interpretive dimensions of healing, health systems in Nigeria and beyond can move toward more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable models of care. Gadamer's hermeneutics provides a philosophical foundation for such an epistemic shift, urging policymakers and scholars alike to enter into dialogue with traditions rather than dismiss them. The picture here is like a political scenario between the dominant and the dominated orthodox practice and the traditional practices and the latter has reached the point for independence in order to contribute its unique values. It is tantamount to saying: "Those dominated for too long now are tired of it and are ready to give whatever it takes in order to be free of the dominations," and make its own unique and positive impacts (Nweke and Nwoye, 2020)

### **Gadamer's Hermeneutics: Key Concepts**

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, as elaborated in *Truth and Method*, provides a foundational framework for interpreting human experiences, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Rather than offering a rigid methodology, Gadamer focuses on the conditions that make understanding possible. His key concepts understanding and interpretation, fusion of horizons, and the role of prejudice and tradition are particularly relevant for grasping how traditional medicine operates as a lived, historical practice that requires contextual engagement rather than objective detachment. This trait is encapsulated in branches of philosophy such as ethics and critical thinking/logic. (Nweke and Nwoye, 2017)

#### **1. Understanding and Interpretation**

For Gadamer, understanding is not a subjective act of reconstructing meaning, but an event a dialogical process that occurs when the interpreter encounters a text, tradition, or practice. Interpretation is integral to understanding and involves engaging with what is said or done in a way that brings new meaning into being (Gadamer, 2004). In this sense, traditional medicine in Anambra State is not just a set of practices or beliefs to be decoded or validated scientifically, but a cultural narrative that demands interpretive openness. Understanding indigenous healing requires entering into the world of the healer and the patient, recognizing that meaning emerges through relational engagement.

#### **2. Fusion of Horizons**

One of Gadamer's most influential ideas is the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*), which refers to the merging of the interpreter's historical and cultural perspective with that of the text or tradition being interpreted. Horizons, in this context, are the range of vision available from a particular standpoint. True understanding arises not by erasing one's own perspective or that of the other, but by allowing a fusion between them through dialogue (Gadamer, 2004). This concept is especially important in the study of traditional medicine, where modern medical researchers and policymakers must strive to understand healing practices within the cultural horizons of Anambra's communities rather than imposing external structures. A fusion of horizons fosters mutual recognition and deepens interpretive engagement with indigenous health systems.

#### **3. Prejudice and Tradition**

Contrary to modern conceptions that view prejudice as inherently negative, Gadamer reclaims the term to mean "pre-judgments" or prior understandings that shape our capacity to interpret. He argues that all understanding is historically effected (*wirkungsgeschichtlich*), mediated through traditions and inherited assumptions (Gadamer, 2004). Rather than eliminating prejudice, the task of hermeneutics is to critically engage with it, recognizing how it both enables and constrains interpretation. Tradition, far from being a hindrance, provides the continuity that makes understanding possible. When applied to traditional medicine, this insight calls for a respectful engagement with indigenous traditions, acknowledging that they are carriers of meaning and not simply residues of the past. It also challenges researchers to examine their own prejudices, especially those rooted in biomedical superiority, which may obstruct genuine understanding.

Through emphasis on the dialogical, situated, and tradition-bound nature of interpretation, Gadamer's hermeneutics opens up a space for meaningful engagement with traditional medicine. It encourages an interpretive stance that is not only intellectually rigorous but also ethically responsible a stance crucial for integrating indigenous practices into public health discourse without erasing their identity.

### **Traditional Medicine in Anambra State: A Hermeneutic Analysis**

Traditional medicine in Anambra State, Nigeria, is more than a set of curative practices, it is a culturally embedded system of knowledge, belief, and healing that is deeply interwoven with the history, cosmology, and lived experiences of the people. Applying Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of these indigenous healing systems by highlighting how meaning is interpreted, shaped, and transmitted across time and cultural horizons.

#### **1. Cultural Significance**

Traditional medicine in Anambra is inseparable from the Igbo worldview, which views health not merely as the absence of illness but as a balance between the individual, community, ancestors, and spiritual forces. Healing involves rituals, herbs, incantations, and consultations with deities or ancestors through diviners. These practices are rooted in communal epistemologies and religious traditions that are passed down orally (Akpuogwu, 2025). From Gadamer's perspective, these cultural meanings are not static facts to be observed objectively but are texts to be interpreted. The significance of these practices unfolds only through a dialogical encounter between the tradition and the interpreter who approaches it with openness and humility (Gadamer, 2004).

#### **2. Historical Context**

Colonial disruption and the imposition of Western medicine relegated traditional systems to the margins, often branding them as "unscientific" or "superstitious." However, Gadamer's notion of "historically effected consciousness" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) helps illuminate how traditional medicine in Anambra has evolved over time while maintaining its core symbolic structures (Gadamer, 2004). The practice today reflects both resilience and adaptation: it incorporates new influences while retaining ancestral insights. Understanding this historical trajectory requires recognizing that traditions are not fixed relics but living narratives that speak differently in each generation.

#### **3. Practices and Beliefs through the Hermeneutic Lens**

The practices of traditional healers including the preparation of herbal remedies, performance of cleansing rites, and spiritual consultations are often misjudged when viewed through a purely biomedical or empirical lens. Gadamer's idea of the "fusion of horizons" offers a method to engage these practices without distortion. Rather than dismissing them, public health scholars and practitioners can seek to understand them within their cultural context, allowing their own horizons to merge with that of the community. In this way, a healer's invocation of ancestral power is not merely a ritual but an expression of meaning rooted in collective memory and cultural truth. Moreover, Gadamer's defense of "prejudices" as foundational to understanding invites scholars to examine their own assumptions about rationality and efficacy. Rather than approaching traditional medicine as a problem to be corrected, hermeneutics invites an inquiry into its internal logic and symbolic coherence. It emphasizes that meaning is not behind the practice waiting to be uncovered; rather, it emerges in the interaction between interpreter and tradition.

We can deduce that a hermeneutic analysis grounded in Gadamer's philosophy challenges reductive or technocratic approaches to traditional medicine. It calls for an interpretive openness that values tradition as a dialogical partner in the pursuit of health. In Anambra State, this means recognizing traditional medicine not only as a medical system but also as a cultural and historical discourse that speaks to the identity and well-being of its people. Interpreting it hermeneutically affirms its place in contemporary public health while opening new paths for respectful integration and policy development.

### **Public Health Implications: A Gadamerian Perspective**

The intersection of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and public health policy offers a fertile ground for rethinking the integration of traditional medicine into formal healthcare systems, particularly in culturally rich regions like Anambra State, Nigeria. Gadamer's key ideas such as the *fusion of horizons*, *prejudgment*, *historical consciousness*, and *dialogue* encourage a more reflexive, interpretive approach to healthcare that acknowledges the historical and cultural embeddedness of health practices (Gadamer, 2004). In this section, we explore how these concepts can inform contemporary health strategies by focusing on integration with modern healthcare, cultural sensitivity, and dialogical engagement.

#### **1. Integration with Modern Healthcare**

Efforts to integrate traditional medicine with modern healthcare in Africa have often been characterized by asymmetrical power relations, with biomedicine positioned as superior (WHO, 2013; Eze, 2020). A Gadamerian approach challenges this by proposing that true understanding arises through the *fusion of horizons*, wherein both knowledge systems engage each other in mutual interpretation. This philosophical stance shifts the question from whether traditional medicine is "scientific enough" to how it can be meaningfully understood and situated within broader health dialogues.

For instance, traditional herbal practices in Anambra State have shown effectiveness in treating ailments ranging from gastrointestinal infections to spiritual disorders (Akpuogwu, 2025). Rather than requiring these methods to

be validated solely by biomedical criteria, a hermeneutic approach encourages dialogue between traditional healers and biomedical professionals to co-create integrative pathways (Maduka, 2023; Anyidoho&Tetty, 2007). Such cooperation has been piloted in other African countries like Ghana and Uganda with notable success (Oppong, 2021).

### **2. Cultural Sensitivity in Public Health Practice**

Gadamer (2004) insists that understanding is always situated within a tradition—that is, shaped by our cultural and historical presuppositions. This notion is critical in the realm of public health, where top-down interventions often fail due to a lack of cultural grounding. In Anambra State, traditional medicine is not merely therapeutic but symbolic and spiritual, reflecting beliefs about the interconnectedness of body, community, and cosmos (Mbiti, 1969; Olatokun, 2020).

Public health workers must approach communities not with the aim of correcting their “misconceptions” but of engaging their cultural frames, hermeneutically. This involves learning from local idioms of illness, understanding indigenous diagnostic frameworks, and respecting the role of ancestral and spiritual belief systems in health-seeking behaviour (Comaroff, 1985; McGregor, 2004). Training programmes for public health professionals should therefore include cultural and hermeneutic competence as essential tools for equitable healthcare delivery (Behrens, 2006).

### **3. Dialogue and Mutual Understanding**

At the core of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is dialogue, a model of engagement that seeks not consensus but mutual understanding. This concept is crucial for public health policy in multicultural contexts. According to Agyeman, when applied to the relationship between state healthcare institutions and traditional medicine practitioners in Anambra State, dialogue fosters legitimacy, trust, and collaborative problem-solving (Agyeman, 2019). Dialogue enables a shift from policy imposition to participatory governance. For instance, including traditional healers in policymaking forums not only democratizes knowledge but also leads to more locally acceptable and sustainable interventions (Quansah, 2018; WHO, 2019). Such engagements allow for a reinterpretation of public health not as a neutral science, but as a field that must be historically and culturally negotiated.

Therefore, a Gadamerian approach to traditional medicine and public health in Anambra State affirms the need for hermeneutic openness and awareness that all understanding is historically situated and dialogically achieved. Integrating traditional medicine into public healthcare systems cannot be accomplished through scientific imperialism but through cultural sensitivity, historical consciousness, and dialogical respect. By embracing the philosophical insights of Gadamer, public health in Nigeria and beyond can evolve into a more inclusive, pluralistic, and humane endeavour.

### **Hermeneutic Circle in Health-Seeking Behaviour**

Gadamer’s hermeneutics emphasises that understanding is not a linear act but a hermeneutic circle, a constant movement between the parts and the whole, between past experiences and present interpretations. This idea is illuminating when applied to health-seeking behaviour in Anambra State, where individuals and communities often navigate between multiple medical systems. Illness is rarely understood as a purely biological condition; rather, it is interpreted through personal history, cultural narratives, and communal experience.

For instance, according to John S. Mbiti, a patient suffering from persistent stomach pain may first consult a hospital, where the condition is diagnosed as an ulcer. However, if biomedical treatment fails or proves unsatisfactory, the same patient may interpret the illness differently—perhaps as the consequence of breaking a cultural taboo or as an attack by malevolent spiritual forces. In this way, the patient’s understanding of the illness shifts back and forth between biomedical and traditional explanatory models (Mbiti, 1990).

This circular process reflects the hermeneutic dynamic: each new experience of healing reconfigures how illness is understood. Communities in Anambra thus engage in a continuous cycle of reinterpretation, moving between hospitals, churches, and traditional shrines, each providing a partial horizon of understanding (Arhinful, 1999). Public health officials often misinterpret this mobility as indecisiveness or ignorance. Yet, seen through Gadamer’s lens, it represents a rational process of meaning-making, rooted in the quest for wholeness and reconciliation in health.

### **Language, Symbolism, and Healing Practices**

For Gadamer, language is the medium of understanding; it is through words, narratives, and symbols that truth is disclosed (Gadamer, 2013). This insight applies directly to traditional medicine in Anambra State, where healing is inseparable from communicative acts such as proverbs, ritual incantations, songs, and prayers. In these contexts, language does more than convey information, it creates the very conditions of healing.

A dibia, for instance, may chant an incantation not merely to prescribe medicine but to symbolically align the patient with ancestral forces. The words themselves, often unintelligible to outsiders, function as performative acts that reshape the patient's perception of illness and health (Priest, 2002). Proverbs such as "*Ogwu anaghi aru oru ma onu ekwughi ya*" ("medicine is not effective unless it is spoken over") reveal the belief that spoken words complete the healing process.

Olupona opined that symbolism equally plays a critical role. Ritual objects like kolanuts, palm fronds, and white chalk are not neutral materials but linguistic signs that communicate restoration, purity, or covenant with the ancestors (Olupona, 2014). Within such frameworks, healing is not simply the ingestion of herbs but the reinterpretation of illness through a shared symbolic vocabulary that integrates the physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of life.

In public health, this highlights the need to respect and integrate the communicative dimensions of healing. Efforts to modernise or regulate traditional medicine often focus solely on pharmacological validation, neglecting the linguistic and symbolic aspects that give healing its meaning in the first place. Gadamer's hermeneutics underscores that understanding and dialogue expressed through language are essential to any attempt to bridge traditional medicine with biomedical systems.

### **Case Studies of Successful Integration Models and Challenges in Anambra State: A Gadamerian Prism**

The incorporation of traditional medicine (TM) into public health systems in Anambra State has witnessed pockets of success and persistent challenges. Applying Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics to these developments sheds light on both the underlying tensions and the transformative possibilities of a dialogical, culturally embedded public health model. Gadamer's emphasis on the *fusion of horizons*, the legitimacy of *prejudices* rooted in historical experience, and the necessity of *dialogue* in interpretation offers interpretive resources to analyze and improve these integration efforts.

#### **Case Study 1: The Ihiala Herbal Collaborative Clinic**

One notable success story in Anambra State is the informal collaboration between Ihiala General Hospital and a network of traditional herbalists in the region. This model has focused particularly on treating chronic ulcers and malaria using local herbs vetted through years of empirical knowledge. Patients often visit herbalists first, and if complications arise, referrals are made to the hospital. In recent years, this referral system has become more systematic, with local nurses receiving basic orientation in interpreting herbal diagnoses and collaborating with herbalists to track patient outcomes (Ubabuko, 2025).

From a Gadamerian perspective, this model represents a *fusion of horizons* between two medical paradigms. Rather than insisting on validation through external biomedical protocols alone, the hospital staff have begun to recognize the internal rationality and historical legitimacy of traditional healing practices. The success lies in the willingness of both parties to enter into a genuine dialogue, characterized not by assimilation, but mutual understanding.

#### **Case Study 2: Public Health Campaigns and the Misreading of Tradition**

Conversely, efforts by the Ministry of Health to enforce standardized maternal health procedures in the Onitsha and Awka zones have often clashed with traditional birth attendants (TBAs). In many cases, TBAs were excluded from state-sponsored maternal health workshops due to assumptions about their "unscientific" practices. This exclusion led to resistance among local communities who continued to favour TBAs due to trust, accessibility, and cultural familiarity (Okafor, 2022).

Gadamer's concept of *prejudice* (Vorurteil) understood not negatively, but as historically informed pre-understandings explains how health officials' biases against traditional medicine hindered productive engagement. By failing to interpret these practices through the lens of local history and cultural logic, policymakers disrupted potential points of convergence. A hermeneutic approach would call for a re-evaluation of these prejudgments through dialogical encounters with the tradition, rather than unilateral dismissals.

### **Challenges to Integration**

Several persistent challenges hinder integration efforts:

1. **Lack of Legal and Institutional Structures:** Despite Nigeria's national policy on traditional medicine (FMOH, 2007), local implementation remains weak. There is no formal licensing or monitoring body for traditional practitioners in Anambra State.
2. **Epistemological Conflicts:** Biomedical practitioners often demand quantifiable evidence that does not align with the experiential, narrative-based validation in traditional systems (Owolabi, 2016).
3. **Cultural Miscommunication:** Efforts to "educate" traditional practitioners are frequently top-down, ignoring the interpretive value of indigenous languages, metaphors, and healing ontologies (Akinyemi & Nwankwo, 2020).

### Gadamerian Solutions: Toward Dialogical Health Policy

A Gadamerian assertion does not offer technical solutions but suggests a philosophical orientation for addressing these issues. Some implications include:

- i. Dialogical Policy Forums: Health policy-making should include structured, ongoing dialogues between traditional healers, biomedical practitioners, and community representatives. These forums would allow *prejudices* to surface and be refined through conversation.
- ii. Interpretive Training: Public health professionals should be trained in *cultural hermeneutics*, equipping them to understand the historical and symbolic dimensions of indigenous healing practices.
- iii. Recognition of Tradition as a Knowledge System: Instead of treating traditional medicine as a collection of untested practices, it should be engaged as a *tradition* in Gadamer's sense: a dynamic, living process of transmission and re-interpretation (Gadamer, 1987).

It is evident that the case studies from Anambra State illustrate both the potential and pitfalls of integrating traditional medicine into modern public health systems. Through Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, we gain a framework that values historical consciousness, promotes dialogical understanding, and challenges epistemic hierarchies. A more inclusive, interpretive model of public health, one that listens before it legislates could bridge the gaps between divergent healing paradigms and enhance healthcare delivery in culturally complex societies like Anambra State.

### Conclusion

Conclusively, this article has explored the intersection between the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the practice of traditional medicine within the public health context of Anambra State, Nigeria. Through the hermeneutic concepts of understanding, the fusion of horizons, and the productive role of prejudices and tradition, the study has examined how deeper cultural and historical insights can inform more inclusive and dialogical approaches to healthcare integration.

The case studies presented demonstrate that successful collaboration between traditional and biomedical health systems often depends on mutual recognition and openness to dialogue rather than domination by one epistemological system over the other. In places like Ihiala, where informal partnerships have emerged between herbalists and medical professionals, Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons becomes evident. Conversely, failures in maternal health initiatives—where traditional birth attendants were excluded due to negative judgments, reveal the limitations of top-down policy implementation that ignores the embeddedness of tradition in public health practices.

The article also shows that Gadamer's hermeneutics provides a critical framework for rethinking integration not as a technical or bureaucratic task but as an interpretive, ongoing engagement that respects the cultural autonomy and epistemic legitimacy of traditional medicine.

### Future Directions

Going forward, scholars and policymakers should:

1. **Expand Hermeneutic Public Health Research:** More interdisciplinary studies should apply interpretive outlooks to understand how health beliefs are formed, communicated, and practiced in indigenous contexts.
2. **Institutionalize Dialogical Health Platforms:** Government health agencies should create forums that support dialogical exchanges between traditional healers, biomedical professionals, and community stakeholders.
3. **Curriculum Reform:** Health science education in Nigeria should include components on philosophical hermeneutics, cultural anthropology, and indigenous knowledge systems to train professionals in culturally sensitive care.
4. **Ethnographic Documentation of Traditions:** There is a need for robust documentation of traditional healing methods—not to control them, but to preserve their histories and ensure continuity within regulated but respectful systems.

Ultimately, the insights drawn from Gadamer's hermeneutics suggest that true health integration in multicultural societies must be both epistemologically plural and culturally dialogical. Recognizing the value of tradition not as an obstacle but as a partner in the pursuit of well-being is central to achieving sustainable and just public health in Anambra State and beyond.

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