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Tracing Malaria Incidence across West and East Africa: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Trends, Influences, and Regional Differences

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ABSTRACT

This review provides a comparative historical analysis of malaria incidence across West and East Africa, focusing on the unique trends, environmental influences, and socio-political conditions that shape malaria transmission dynamics in these regions. While malaria poses a pervasive public health burden across Africa, West and East Africa differ significantly in terms of climate, healthcare infrastructure, socio-economic status, and malaria control strategies, each influencing regional patterns of malaria incidence. West Africa's tropical climate fosters year-round transmission, while East Africa, with its diverse topography, experiences seasonal and altitudinal variations in transmission patterns. Historical approaches to malaria control in both regions reveal numerous challenges, including limited healthcare access, economic constraints, and socio-political instability, all of which have impacted the effectiveness of interventions. Through comparative analysis, this review examines the successes and limitations of past and current malaria control efforts, emphasizing the need for region-specific approaches that address climate-adapted interventions, insecticide and drug resistance management, community engagement, and sustainable funding. By analyzing historical and contemporary malaria control strategies, this review highlights best practices and challenges, offering insights for future policies aimed at reducing malaria incidence sustainably and advancing regional public health.

Keywords: Malaria incidence, West Africa, East Africa, malaria transmission, public health.

INTRODUCTION

Malaria remains a significant public health burden in Africa, where it causes widespread illness and death, particularly affecting vulnerable groups such as children under five and pregnant women. Malaria is primarily caused by the *Plasmodium* parasite, transmitted through the bite of infected *Anopheles* mosquitoes, which thrive in warm, humid climates [1]. The disease has entrenched itself across much of Africa, with West and East Africa representing two of the most highly affected regions. Despite this common burden, malaria transmission dynamics, incidence rates, and intervention strategies vary considerably between these regions due to differing environmental, socio-economic, and political conditions. In West Africa, climatic factors such as persistent warm temperatures and high humidity create a favorable environment for *Anopheles* mosquito breeding, resulting in year-round transmission in many areas [2]. West Africa's largely tropical and subtropical climates sustain consistent malaria transmission rates, particularly in rural areas with limited access to healthcare and preventive measures. East Africa, on the other hand, is characterized by a more diverse range of climates and topographies, including highland areas where malaria transmission is seasonal or occurs only sporadically. Regions close to large water bodies, such as Lake Victoria, experience higher malaria transmission due to the availability of breeding sites, while areas at higher altitudes typically experience fewer outbreaks, though climate change is increasingly expanding malaria transmission zones into previously malaria-free areas [3]. Historically, malaria control efforts in both regions have faced numerous challenges, including limited healthcare infrastructure, economic constraints, and socio-political instability. Colonial administrations in both West and East Africa implemented various public health campaigns, but these initiatives were often inconsistent and focused primarily on urban areas, leaving rural

populations underserved [4]. Following independence, malaria control efforts continued to evolve, with international support from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and other global health initiatives. However, these efforts often faced logistical and financial challenges, impacting the sustainability and coverage of malaria prevention and treatment interventions [5]. This review provides a comprehensive examination of malaria incidence trends in West and East Africa, analyzing how historical, environmental, and socio-political factors have shaped malaria prevalence over time. We delve into the role of climate and environmental conditions, the socio-economic determinants of health, and the varying levels of healthcare infrastructure across the regions. By contrasting the experiences of West and East Africa, we aim to highlight the specific factors that contribute to regional differences in malaria incidence and evaluate the efficacy of public health measures in controlling malaria [6]. This comparative approach offers valuable insights into the challenges and successes of malaria control strategies and underscores the need for tailored, region-specific approaches that address each region's unique context. Ultimately, this review aims to inform future malaria control efforts by identifying best practices, regional barriers, and opportunities for more effective, sustainable interventions.

Historical Trends in Malaria Incidence in West and East Africa

Malaria incidence in West Africa has been a significant health challenge due to its warm temperatures, high rainfall, and humidity, which create an optimal environment for the proliferation of Anopheles mosquitoes. These environmental factors, combined with a high population density and widespread socio-economic challenges, have maintained high malaria incidence rates across West Africa over time [7]. In the early 20th century, malaria incidence was widespread across West Africa due to inadequate healthcare infrastructure and limited medical resources. During the colonial period, public health interventions aimed at controlling malaria were generally confined to urban centers and locations with higher economic interest, leading to sporadic successes in malaria control in specific areas. Vector control measures such as draining stagnant water and using quinine to treat infections were implemented in some urban settings, but the reach of these programs was limited, leaving rural communities with little to no intervention [8].

The post-colonial era saw renewed attempts at malaria control, particularly between the 1950s and the 1980s, through initiatives such as the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Malaria Eradication Program (GMEP). However, the program faced substantial obstacles in West Africa, including limited local capacity, socio-political instability, and challenges in sustaining funding. Inadequate infrastructure, logistical barriers, and fluctuating political will further limited the program's effectiveness, resulting in incomplete implementation and low coverage in many regions. Throughout the late 20th century, the persistence of malaria in West Africa was compounded by environmental and socio-economic conditions that hindered effective control measures. Climate patterns across the Sahelian and tropical zones contributed to consistent vector breeding seasons, and rapid population growth exacerbated malaria transmission risks. Urbanization and environmental changes associated with deforestation and land use further disrupted traditional ecological balances, inadvertently creating new breeding sites for malaria vectors [9]. Efforts to mitigate malaria have continued, but West Africa's uniquely challenging landscape, economic constraints, and limited access to healthcare resources have often hindered the effectiveness of large-scale intervention programs.

Socio-Environmental Influences on Malaria Incidence

The malaria transmission dynamics in West and East Africa are influenced by various environmental factors, such as topography, altitude, and rainfall patterns. In West Africa, dense forests, extensive river systems, and coastal zones provide consistent mosquito breeding grounds, leading to year-round transmission in many areas [10]. However, the Sahel region experiences seasonal transmission spikes following the rainy season, as temporary water bodies form breeding sites for mosquitoes. This results in a relatively stable malaria transmission pattern.

In contrast, East Africa's geography includes both lowland regions near large water bodies and highland areas with varying altitudes, which influence malaria transmission patterns. Highland areas experience fewer malaria cases due to cooler temperatures that limit mosquito breeding, but transmission rates spike seasonally following the rainy seasons when temporary breeding sites are created, leading to localized outbreaks. Lower-altitude areas, particularly those near Lake Victoria, face higher malaria incidence due to the abundance of standing water, which supports mosquito breeding throughout the year [11]. Climate change has amplified these regional patterns, presenting new challenges for malaria control in both regions. Rising global temperatures have enabled malaria vectors to survive and breed at higher altitudes, extending transmission zones into previously malaria-free highlands in East Africa. As temperatures continue to rise, areas in the East African highlands that were historically free from malaria now face seasonal outbreaks, posing a threat to populations with limited immunity.

Socio-economic and cultural factors also play a crucial role in malaria transmission dynamics and control efforts in both regions. Poverty remains a fundamental barrier to effective malaria control, with many communities facing logistical challenges in accessing healthcare services due to poor infrastructure, limited transportation options, and high treatment costs. In some rural areas, traditional medicine remains the first line of treatment, leading to delays in seeking effective treatment. Cultural beliefs around malaria transmission vary, with some communities holding misconceptions about the disease's causes and prevention methods, which can limit adherence to preventive measures [12]. Efforts to improve malaria awareness and education have been increasingly prioritized across both regions, with governments and NGOs implementing community-based initiatives to promote ITN usage, proper sanitation, and prompt healthcare-seeking behavior. However, sustainable success requires overcoming socio-economic barriers that hinder healthcare access and improving healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural and impoverished areas.

Regional Differences in Malaria Control Efforts

Vector control measures, such as Insecticide-Treated Nets (ITNs) and Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS), are crucial in malaria prevention across West and East Africa. However, regional differences in socio-economic and geographic conditions have impacted the effectiveness and reach of these measures. In West Africa, ITNs have been widely distributed as a cost-effective tool to reduce malaria transmission, but their widespread use has been hindered by rural areas, logistical challenges, and cultural practices. In East Africa, IRS campaigns have been more effectively implemented in high-burden areas, particularly in regions where malaria transmission is seasonal. These efforts have shown success in reducing transmission rates, particularly when combined with ITN distribution [13]. However, widespread insecticide resistance in mosquito populations has increasingly limited the efficacy of both ITNs and IRS in East Africa. This resistance has led to calls for the development and use of alternative insecticides and integrated vector management approaches that combine biological and environmental interventions. Drug resistance is a critical challenge in malaria treatment for both West and East Africa. Historically, chloroquine was the primary treatment for malaria, but widespread resistance to this drug and sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine (SP) compromised treatment efficacy and spurred a shift to Artemisinin-based Combination [14] Therapies (ACTs). ACTs have proven effective in combating malaria in both regions, but challenges remain. West Africa has encountered delays in the adoption of ACTs due to resource limitations and supply chain inefficiencies, resulting in inconsistent access to treatment, especially in rural and impoverished areas. East African countries, with relatively stronger healthcare infrastructures in some areas, have responded more promptly to the need for ACTs, helping curb drug resistance and improve malaria outcomes. However, resistance to artemisinin itself has started to emerge in parts of Southeast Asia and is feared to spread to Africa, including East Africa. Community-based interventions have proven valuable assets in malaria control, engaging local communities in prevention and treatment efforts. Seasonal malaria chemoprevention (SMC) programs have been implemented with notable success, particularly among children in high-transmission areas. Community health volunteers play an essential role in disseminating information about malaria prevention, distributing ITNs, and promoting healthcare-seeking behaviors. However, funding limitations and gaps in training can hinder the full potential of these community-based initiatives. Strengthening these initiatives through sustainable funding and enhanced training programs will be essential for building resilient malaria control efforts that leverage community engagement to reduce incidence rates [15].

Comparative Analysis and Regional Challenges

West and East Africa both face unique and overlapping challenges in controlling malaria incidence. The broader socio-political stability of a region, level of healthcare infrastructure, community engagement, and climatic conditions all contribute to varying success rates in malaria reduction efforts. Key comparative insights include:

Infrastructure and Resource Allocation: East African countries with relatively better healthcare infrastructure have achieved more consistent malaria control than their West African counterparts.

Climatic and Environmental Variation: East Africa's diverse climatic zones lead to varied seasonal transmission patterns, while West Africa's predominantly tropical climate allows for year-round transmission.

Policy Implementation and Sustainability: East Africa has benefited from more cohesive national policies and external support in recent years, while West Africa's efforts are often decentralized, impacting the consistency of malaria interventions.

CONCLUSION

To effectively address malaria in West and East Africa, future initiatives should prioritize region-specific, evidence-based strategies that consider the unique historical, environmental, and socio-political factors shaping

malaria transmission dynamics. This tailored approach will be key to overcoming existing challenges and making sustainable progress in malaria reduction. Enhanced surveillance systems are critical for tracking malaria incidence accurately and responding swiftly to outbreaks. Current malaria surveillance systems in both West and East Africa face limitations, including incomplete reporting and data lags [16]. Leveraging digital health technologies and mobile health (mHealth) solutions could further strengthen data collection and reporting, especially in remote areas. Integrating climate and environmental data into malaria surveillance would enable proactive responses to outbreaks triggered by weather fluctuations and seasonal changes. Sustainable funding and partnerships are essential for successful malaria control efforts in West and East Africa. Collaborative efforts with organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), the Global Fund, and private sector partners can improve access to technical resources, enhance capacity-building initiatives, and foster research on innovative interventions. Regional partnerships among African countries can help establish shared funding pools and leverage local expertise, especially for cross-border malaria initiatives that address transmission in high-risk border areas. Tailored vector control strategies are necessary due to the rise of insecticide resistance, which necessitates innovative, adaptive vector control methods. Traditional methods, such as Insecticide-Treated Nets (ITNs) and Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS), face reduced efficacy due to resistance in mosquito populations. Alternative strategies should be explored, including biological control methods like larval source management and the introduction of mosquito predators in breeding sites. Rotational use of different classes of insecticides, known as insecticide resistance management (IRM), can also help slow resistance development. Community-based education programs are critical for sustained malaria prevention. Many communities in both West and East Africa face barriers to accessing formal healthcare, and local knowledge and participation in prevention are invaluable. Expanding community-based education programs can strengthen local knowledge about malaria transmission, prevention, and treatment adherence, particularly in underserved rural areas where access to information may be limited. Research and development of new antimalarial drugs and tools is essential due to the ongoing challenge of drug resistance. Research institutions in Africa, in partnership with international pharmaceutical and research entities, should prioritize developing cost-effective, accessible treatments that address current resistance patterns. Rapid diagnostic tests and portable screening tools will enable more accessible, accurate malaria testing, particularly in rural regions where laboratory facilities may be lacking. Climate-adapted malaria control strategies are increasingly important as climate change continues to alter malaria transmission patterns. A sustained commitment to adaptive, region-specific interventions, combined with long-term investments in research, funding, and community engagement, will be essential for transforming malaria control efforts and moving closer to the ultimate goal of malaria elimination across the continent.

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