



## EXAMINING THE INDIGENOUS PSYCHOTHERAPY MODEL MESERON THERAPY AND SOME OF ITS THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS

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Received: 2 JULY 2022 Accepted: 06 DEC. 2022

Date of Publication: December 2022

### Abstract

*This article examines the indigenous psychotherapy model Meseron Therapy and chronicles some of its applications. The Meseron Therapy was developed by Professor Alfred Awaritefe in 1995. Meseron means “I refuse” in the Urhobo language. The therapy focuses on the power of the spoken word and how it is able to effectively change a person and a person’s condition by encouraging the person to think, say, and do things that will cause a change in the person’s condition. The origin of Meseron therapy was discussed, Meseron as a motivational theory and cognitive therapy was examined. The Practice of Meseron Therapy, the basic assumptions, aims and goals, therapeutic implications, and the techniques and tools of Meseron therapy were highlighted, with the therapeutic implications of Meseron Therapy further discussed. The article concluded with a call for clinical and counselling psychologists to integrate indigenous psychotherapy methods into their practice. Research endeavors and publications in indigenous psychotherapy methods were also encouraged.*

### Introduction

Meseron is an Urhobo word meaning, “I reject it” (Awaritefe, 1995; Awaritefe, 2017, p.15; Ofofwe, 2005, 2017). Professor Alfred Awaritefe, the first Professor of Psychological Medicine in Nigeria, integrated the word *Meseron* into psychological treatment as a form of indigenous psychotherapy modality to form

“Meseron therapy.” Professor Awaritefe introduced Meseron Therapy to the world in his paper, “Meseron therapy” presented during the first national conference on the practise of psychotherapy in Nigeria held at the Nigerian Institute for International Affairs, Victoria Island, Lagos, in November, 1995 (Awaritefe, 1995). The Urhobos, from whose language the word Meseron is derived,

live in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. They are in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. In Delta State, the Urhobos are purported to be the predominant ethnic group. The Urhobos are bounded on the southeast, west, south, and northeast by the Isoko, Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Ukwuani, respectively.

A treatise on the history of the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta was put together by Professor Peter Ekeh in 2007 where he highlighted the pre-colonial and post-colonial history of the Urhobo people. The Urhobos are predominantly traditional people with a very rich oral tradition filled with mythologies and philosophies that guide their life. Their culture, marriage, and belief systems are unique, and they pass on their traditional beliefs orally from one generation to another (Ekeh, 2007). The Urhobos use oral traditions in communicating with one another, in giving instructions, and in showing in-depth wisdom. They use proverbs in judicial proceedings especially in resolving conflicts (Ohwovoriole, 2011). In line with the belief system of their neighbouring Igbo, they believe in the spirit world and the world of the living and also believe in their ancestors in the spirit world and the role they play in the affairs of the living.

The Urhobos worship the almighty God, known as Oghene, the supreme being who resides in the sky. They believe that *Oghene* will always fight for those whose hands are pure. The Urhobos use artefacts in various aspects of their social life, including settling social conflicts traditionally (Diakparomre,

2009). The Urhobos use proverbs in their traditional music (Opuidi & Sanudje, 2016) and in their traditional judicial proceedings (Udi, 2016). For instance, when they are resolving conflicts, the Urhobos use proverbs to encourage people to shun violence and embrace peace. An Urhobo proverb states, "Ughwu ro re hwe'meghene, ode vwo vwi'rhowo, k'aghogho," which translates to, "The death that should have killed a youth; if it causes him to break his leg, this calls for jubilation" (Udi 2016, p. 7). This proverb highlights the need to appreciate a less severe loss when an issue could have led to a bigger loss. Having in mind that, a "proverb is a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience" (Ohwovoriole, 2011, p.122) and "Proverbs are representative of the world view of the native speakers of a language" (Mebitaghan & Obikudo, 2018, p.142), it then follows that Urhobo proverbs are replete with themes of reconciliation and peacemaking, as evinced in the work of Udi (2016). With these themes, rejecting unpleasant things, such as conflicts, reflects an Urhobo worldview and way of life.

The principal idea behind Meseron is that people believe in the power of the spoken word and are convinced that the spoken word could positively or negatively affect them (Awaritefe & Ofovwe, 2007; Ofovwe, 2005). It follows that when things go in one's favour or advantage, one accepts them, but when things go in the opposite direction, one should reject them or say, "Meseron". As a matter of generally acceptable behaviour, Nigerians have a strong penchant for rejecting disagreeable or unpleasant things with phrases such as, "I reject it," or "It is not

my portion.” Nigerians are generally upbeat and optimistic people. A major attempt to capture this optimism was in terms of their level of happiness which was formally brought to the fore for the first time through the 2003 happiness survey (BBC News, 2003) where Nigerians were adjudged the happiest people on planet earth. Meseron has been seen as a motivational theory and a cognitive therapy.

### **Meseron as a Motivational Theory**

Meseron as a motivational theory is hinged on the concept of man’s need to strive. This need to strive is at the core of humanity and started in the garden of Eden as recorded in the bible story in Genesis (Awaritefe, 1998) where as a result of the fall, the ground was cursed for man’s sake. Hence, after the fall, instead of enjoying a life of ease as it was for him prior to the fall, man had to strive to make things work in his life and for the ground to yield it fruits to him (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 3: 16-19). According to Awaritefe (1998), to strive successfully and succeed in life, man has been bequeathed with psychological instruments for striving which are: Perceptive ability, appraisal mechanism and operational facilities. The perceptive ability enables man to be aware of his situation while the appraisal mechanism enables him to evaluate what to do at any given time and the operational facilities in terms of thoughts, words and actions are tools man uses to overcome. During Meseron Therapy, the onus is on the therapist to assist the client to understand himself/herself as a striving creature with the inherent ability to overcome. Once this though has been

instilled in a client, the client can then use Meseron as an operational tool for overcoming by changing thoughts, words, and actions (Awaritefe & Ofovwe, 2007). The interaction between thoughts, words and actions was highlighted by Nwaka and Awaritefe (2018, p.92) as: “I think about it, confess it with my mouth, and act in such a way that it happens in my life.” The efficacy of words in charting a man’s life’s course is evinced in the statement attributed to Lao Tzu, the Chinese Philosopher (King, 2019): “Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny.” In Meseron, the client is empowered with positive “I can” and “Can do” words which enables him/her experience change.

### **Meseron as a cognitive therapy**

Bello *et al.*, (2018) compared Meseron therapy with other cognitive therapies such as, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). Prior to Bello *et al.*’s (2018) comparison, Ofovwe and Awaritefe (2008) had earlier done a comparative analysis between rational emotive therapy and Meseron therapy which highlighted some similarities and differences between both therapies. The predominant theme in all cognitive therapies is the role of thinking in maintaining maladaptive behaviour on the one hand and enhancing adaptive behaviour on the other hand. Meseron therapy is cognitive in nature because it emphasises the need for the client to take a position in any

situation they are facing while emphasising their rejection of the unwholesome situation. Like the cognitive therapies, Meseron emphasises the power of the spoken word which stems from thoughts and manifests in actions. As a cognitive therapy, Meseron emphasises the importance of thoughts. Illogical thought process tends to perpetuate behavioural issues. Hence, clients are taught in Meseron therapy how to strive to move from one point in life to another point. Aside from words and deeds, Meseron, like the cognitive therapies also emphasises actions.

Thinking and saying will not automatically produce results if actionable steps are not taken to ensure the results are enforced. Such steps tend to vary with the situation at hand. For instance, taking action for a stroke patient with a secondary depression (Awaritefe & Ofovwe, 2007) would be for the patient to begin to do what they could not do before such as raising one's hand or going to the bathroom unaided. For someone with a fear of dark places (Ofowwe, 2004), action in Meseron conceptualization would be for the patient to start entering dark places or do what the person could not do before in relation to darkness. For someone who is under tremendous stress and want to apply Meseron as an antidote to stress (Ofowwe, 2005), action would be to make a concerted effort towards the reduction of the stress the individual could be experiencing, while for a patient with an obsession (Awaritefe & Otakpor, 2004), action would mean the reduction of obsessive actions.

Some striking differences and similarities exist between Meseron therapy and other

cognitive-behavioral therapy methods. For instance, Bello *et al.*, (2018, P. 49) highlighted some similarities which include that they are all cognitive in orientation and work from the perspective of the part played by negative and self-defeating thoughts in psychological issues. They are all also based on using psychological modalities to assist people achieve their goals and adopt positive ways of life. Ofovwe and Awaritefe (2008) also highlighted that Meseron and RET are in agreement that changing thoughts and perception should be the aim in resolving negative thoughts and emotion. Not only that, both therapies are in agreement on the role of irrational thinking in psychological conflicts and also in agreement on the need for the client to adopt a better philosophy of life which is in line with man as a striving being's position of Meseron (Awaritefe, 2002).

Regarding the difference between Meseron Therapy and other cognitive behavioural therapy methods, Ofovwe and Awaritefe (2008) asserted that Meseron is non-judgmental and non-threatening, while RET tend to tilt towards that direction in therapy by the therapist arguing with the client to dispute illogical beliefs.

### **The Practice of Meseron Therapy**

The clinical application of Meseron therapy has been examined by other authors such as, Ofovwe and Awaritefe (2014) in stuttering, Ofovwe (2004), in the management of children's fears; Awaritefe (2004), in the management of anorexia nervosa, Awaritefe and Otakpor (2004) in the treatment of obsession and in Confronting Negative Thoughts (Afolabi & Ariyo, 2014). It is

important to note that in practicing or applying Meseron therapy, the therapist must be acquainted with the basic assumptions (philosophy), aims and goals, therapeutic implications, techniques and tools and benefits of Meseron therapy as outlined by Ofovwe and Awaritefe (2007, cited in Ofove, 2011, pp. 257-258).

According to Ofove (2011, p. 257), the Basic Assumptions (Tenets/Philosophy) of Meseron therapy are as follows:

1. Power resides in the spoken word
2. Words can sensitise an individual to action or inaction
3. The potential for change rests with the individual
4. Rejection of the status quo without constructive action is akin to inaction
5. Man is a striving creature

According to Ofove (2011, p. 257), the Aims and Goals of Meseron therapy are as follows:

1. Elimination of undesirable conditions
2. Change in concepts and values
3. Exploration of resources
4. Growth of the self
5. Insight and emotional reorganization
6. Change of habit

According to Ofove (2011, p. 257), the therapeutic implications of Meseron therapy are as follows:

1. Meseron awakens the client to conscious action
2. Meseron does not subscribe to the past
3. Meseron acknowledges reality

4. Meseron does not uphold unrealistic optimism
5. Meseron therapy is not about unrealistic optimism. It is bound by a determined pull to replace unwholesomeness with tangible and positive action
6. Meseron recognises the potential for growth within every individual

According to Ofove (2011, pp. 257-258), the techniques and tools of Meseron therapy are as follows:

1. Construction of relevant and appropriate statements
2. Replacement of self-defeatist statements with appropriate statements
3. Use of appropriate statements as a way of life
4. Encouraging the client to make right choice
5. Making the client know that he is the master of his fate
6. Motivating the individual to strive

Because the basic assumptions, aims, and goals of Meseron Therapy, as well as the techniques and tools, are self-explanatory, efforts will be made here to briefly discuss each point raised by Ofovwe (2011, p.257) on the Therapeutic Implications of Meseron Therapy:

1. **Meseron awakens the client to conscious actions:** Clients sometimes do not know how to act or what to do in order to move from where they are to the next level of

change that they need. Sometimes, the therapist or a cursory observer would be looking at all the obvious opportunities that the client has at his/her disposal to make his/her life better but the client is sort of blinded to these options. What Meseron Therapy does is assists the client to take action towards making his/her life better. Awakening a client to conscious action is akin to inviting the client to wake up to their true nature (Sharma & Ryan, 2018), which depicts a life of strength, focus, and accomplishment.

2. **Meseron does not subscribe to the past:** Meseron therapy is more focused on the present than in the past. It is unlike the psychoanalysis and psychodynamic family of therapies and some behavioural therapies that at some point or another take a journey to the past in order to ascertain how the past is affecting the present and perhaps the future (Boeree, 2006). The focus of Meseron is in the “now” or in the present and how the client can be moved from where they are to a higher level. Previous actions and failures that could inhibit a client from making progress are not dwelt on. Rather, how an individual can move to the next and higher level of productive living are explored during therapy.
3. **Meseron acknowledges reality:** Steve Mirsky once noted that, “acknowledging reality is an

excellent way to function in it: Castles in the air are not for habitation” (Mirsky, 2020). Meseron encourages the client to acknowledge where the client is in their life at a particular point in time. Meseron therapy encourages accountability which helps the client to acknowledge reality since it is the client that knows exactly where he/she is and how he/she got there. In therapy, acknowledging where one is will ultimately assist one to reach where one needs to reach and this is done by acknowledging one’s current situation, having a good grasp of one’s situation and accepting that there is need for a change. It is only then, that learning from a reality becomes possible and change becomes inevitable. It is important to note and emphasise that the majority of Meseron clients are persons who have not lost touch with reality.

4. **Meseron does not uphold unrealistic optimism:** According to Shepperd et al. (2015, p.232), “People are considered unrealistically optimistic if they predict that a personal future outcome will be more favorable than that suggested by a relevant, objective standard.” Unrealistic optimism is generally becoming pervasive with people having an unrealistic philosophy of think good, feel good, have good. There is nothing wrong with thinking that way. But things do not always pan out as one expects. The

importance of maintaining a balanced thinking and following a balanced approach to things is an integral aspect of Meseron therapy. Some people have positive mindsets and beliefs while some people are resilient and may have different outcomes even though they have been exposed to the same situation. For instance, if two people are exposed to the same toxic chemical at the same rate, there is a great possibility that both of them will have the same negative health outcome. Meseron will not encourage any of them that they should reject the fact that they have been exposed even though there is more than enough evidence that there will be a negative effect of the toxic exposure. Be it unrealistic absolute optimism or unrealistic comparative optimism (Shepperd *et al.*, 2015), Meseron does not encourage it. Rather, Meseron encourages realistic optimism (Schneider, 2001).

5. **Meseron therapy is not about unrealistic optimism. It is bound by a determined pull to replace unwholesomeness with tangible and positive action:** Schneider (2001) made a distinction between unrealistic and realistic optimism and highlighted the fact that whereas, unrealistic optimism could be disadvantageous or detrimental to the individual, realistic optimism on the other hand is advantageous and beneficial to the individual. This

distinction is important in understanding the therapeutic implication of Meseron Therapy. In therapy, the client is helped to gravitate towards achieving a positive outcome in life in spite of possible shortcomings and drawbacks. Efforts are made in therapy for the client to become more and achieve more in a realistic way. In spite of the fact that optimism is good, it is important to balance it because having a positive outlook may play a role in good mental health whereas, having it in excess could lead to adverse effects (Bortolotti & Antrobus, 2015). In a situation where an unrealistic optimist sees effortless accomplishments, a realistic optimist sees a positive open door of opportunities in the same situation and takes calculated, strategic and persistent actions toward accomplishing their goals and overcoming setbacks while doing so. Because they take time to deeply ponder how to navigate hurdles along the way, realistic optimists position themselves appropriately for success and they go on to achieve it. The principal distinction would be that one group make things happen while the other believe things will happen to them. As a therapeutic tool, Meseron encourages positive action which is engaged optimistically, realistically and courageously. During therapy, clients are motivated to be optimistic. However, they are also encouraged to match up their optimism with hard

work, concerted efforts and targeted actions.

**6. Meseron recognises the potential for growth within every individual:**

As a motivational and cognitive therapy, Meseron Therapy recognises that each individual is bequeathed with a potential to outgrow any particular level they have found themselves. Meseron causes or encourages the client to grow, drawing from the premise that growth is one of the characteristics of living things. Interestingly, it is rare for a therapist treating a client from the Meseron perspective to see the client as not being able to make progress and this perspective gives impetus for growth in the client.

**Conclusion**

Since Meseron Therapy was brought into mainstream Psychology in Nigeria about 27 years ago, in 1995, many interesting publications have been made on the concept including: Meseron therapy in the management of anorexia nervosa (Awaritefe, 2004); Meseron Therapy and the nature of Man (Awaritefe, 1998); The treatment of an obsession by meseron therapy (Awaritefe & Otakpor, 2004); Non- Western Therapies: A Review of Meseron Therapy, what's the way forward? (Ofovwe & Ezemokwe, 2014); Meseron therapy. In fundamentals of general and clinical psychology (Ofovwe, 2011); The use of multiple psychological techniques in the management of stuttering: A case report (Ofovwe & Awaritefe (2014); Awareness and use of Meseron therapy among clinical

psychologists in southern Nigeria (Ofovwe & Ezemokwe, 2016); Comparison Between Cognitive Behaviour, Rational Emotive Behaviour and Meseron Therapies (Bello et al., 2018). Clinical and counselling psychologist are hereby encouraged to keep using aspects of this therapy in their practice. Researchers should endeavour to conduct empirical studies in the area of indigenous psychotherapy models such as Meseron Therapy and Harmony Restoration Therapy.

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